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MY MOTHER'S  
DIAMONDS

MARIA J. GREER



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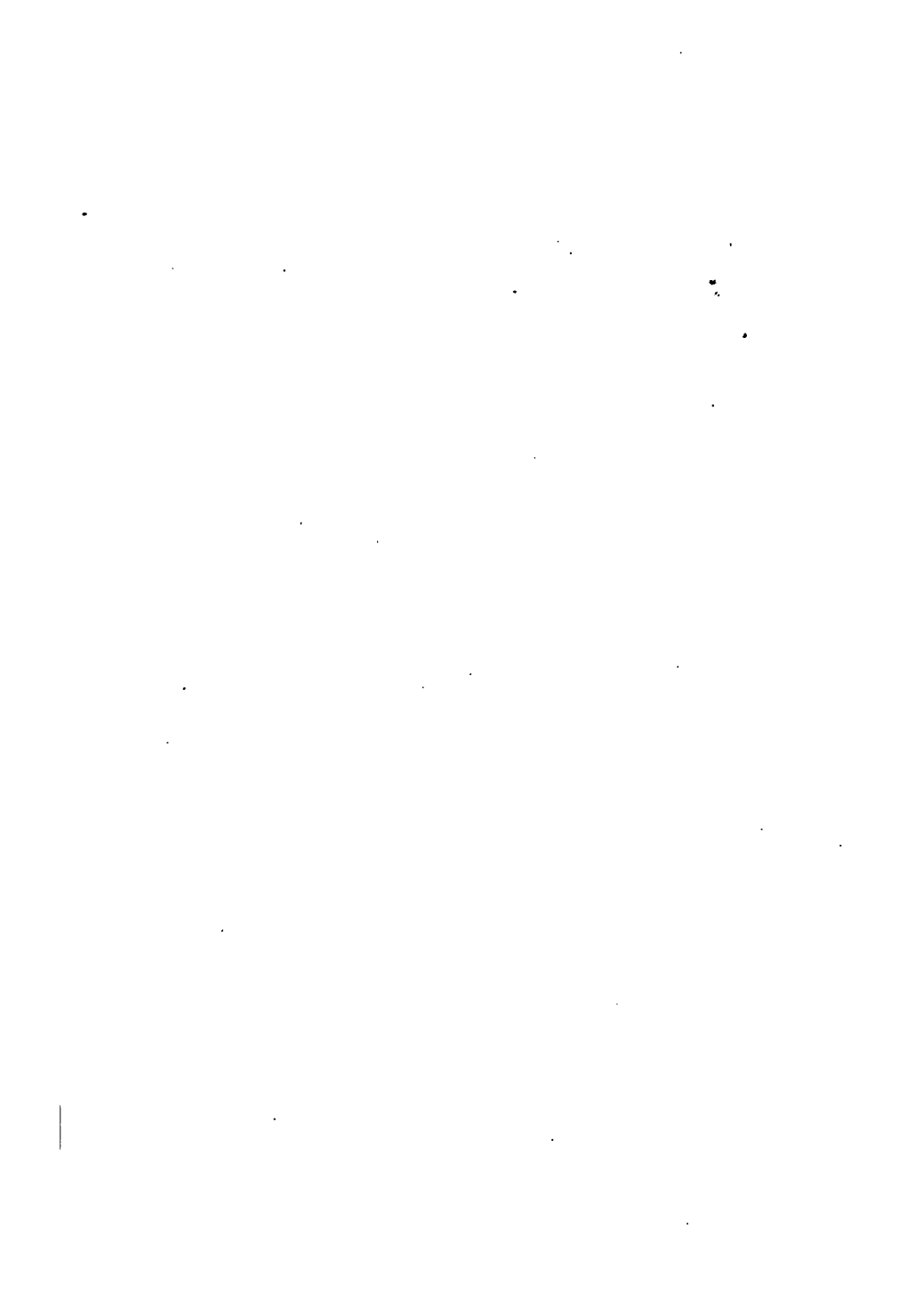




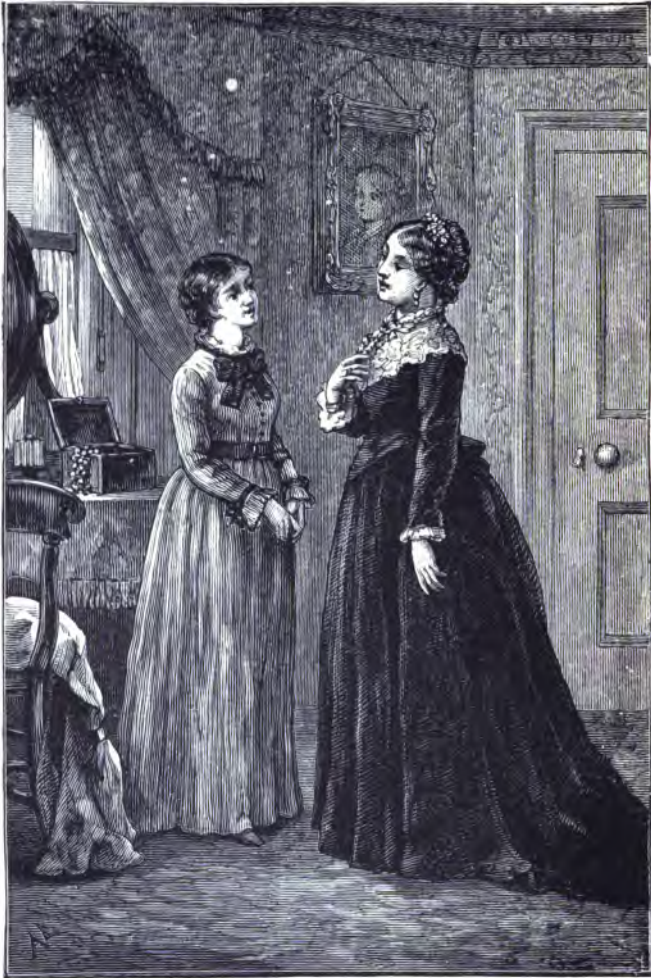


*MY MOTHER'S DIAMONDS.*









"I KNEW YOU WOULD ADMIRE THEM, ELLIE."

*See page 141.*

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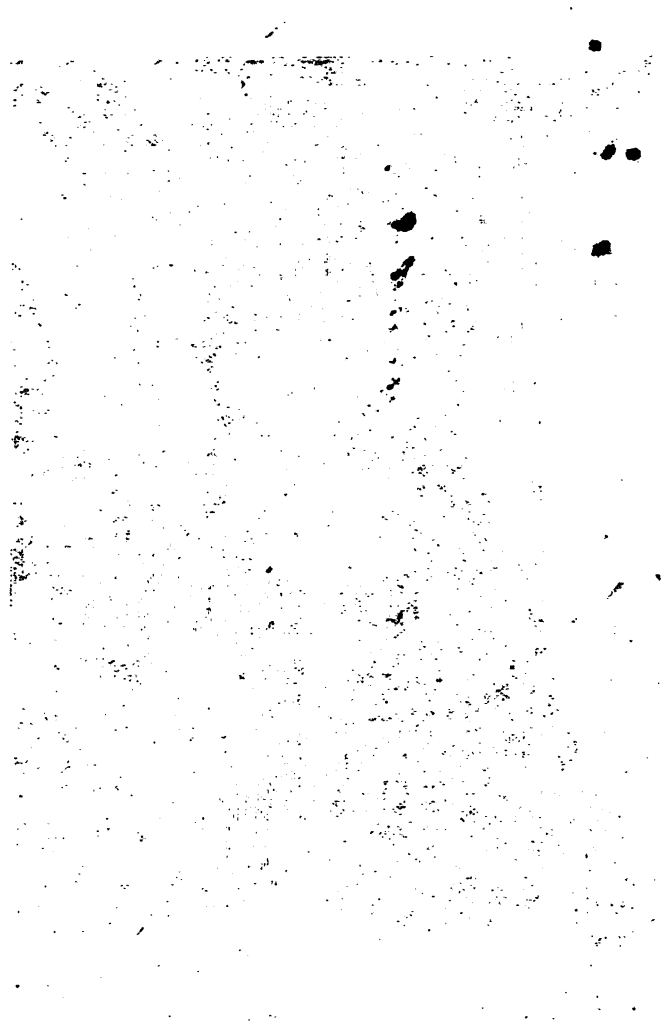
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"I KNEW YOU WOULD ADMIRE THEM, ELLIE."

*See page 141.*





# *MY MOTHER'S DIAMONDS.*

A DOMESTIC STORY

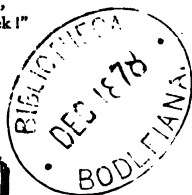
FOR DAUGHTERS AT HOME.

BY

MARIA J. GREER.

*WITH FRONTISPIECE BY A. LUDOVICO.*

"Treading a failing world of faults and foes,  
Our hearts keep hard while we ourselves are weak.  
O Love that seest, suffers, pardons all,  
Move us, forgiven, to forgiveness meek!"



GRIFFITH AND FARRAN,  
CORNER OF ST. PAUL'S CHURCHYARD, LONDON.

1879.

251. c. 727.

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# MY MOTHER'S DIAMONDS.

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## CHAPTER I.

### A MYSTERIOUS ANNOUNCEMENT.

"Where summer light is strongest thrown  
The shadows deepen here ;  
No perfect day is born on earth  
Without a farewell tear."

"SHE is a rock of sense."

"But a rock is a very hard thing, Rachel."

2 "And you are very hard to please, let me tell you, Richard."

"I hope not. Simplicity satisfies me. That is simple enough, surely ?"

If "those that live in glass houses should not throw stones," those that stand at open windows should not speak loud. I think the proverb ought certainly to be improved upon so far, since there is not even the transparent protection of the glass to avert risk in the latter case.

3 The sash of the bow-window in our pretty drawing-

room at Crystal Lodge had been thrown up, and I was returning from the garden with some freshly-gathered flowers, when the foregoing remarks reached me. Though no name had been mentioned, I knew by an instinct whom they concerned, and with the blossoms half scattered from my hold, I sprang impulsively into the room.

"Oh, papa, you are not going to give us a governess?" I exclaimed, running up to the gentleman.

"*Give* is not exactly the word, Ellie," he rejoined quietly. "It will cost me something, and if I make a sacrifice you should be ready to yield up your wishes in return."

I felt my cheeks flushing all over. I divined at once the quarter whence the interference came, and I cast a reproachful glance on Aunt Rachel. She was my father's maiden sister, his senior by six or seven years, and she endeavoured to rule him as well as everybody else.

It seemed to me hard enough that both father and mother should be leaving us for a time without the added trial of an unwelcome visitant. Their intended departure for New York for an absence of two or three months had only been announced to me the evening before, and I felt nothing of freedom at the thought, only a sense of solitary sadness. I was the eldest of six children, but my responsibilities scarcely weighed upon me when my dear mother was amongst us to direct and determine all. My father, Mr. Wynham

was a gentleman of small independent means, and for some years he had abandoned his profession as a physician, and lived with us quietly in the pretty country place which was our present home. He taught the boys himself, and my mother was the only instructress of my sisters and myself. There was something mysterious about the projected visit which disturbed me now. It was sudden and secret, at least so it seemed to me, though possibly I was not taken as early into the confidence of my elders as I would have wished. Aunt Rachel, unluckily, was on the scene, and I knew that she counselled the discipline of tasks and tuition in our parents' absence. This might be all very well for the younger ones, but not if it involved a restraint over me. I had set a plan before my mind which this suggestion of hers wholly interfered with. I was ambitious of proving a certain talent for rule which I flattered myself I possessed. Doing little as yet, my abilities only extended themselves to criticism of others; and thus my experience being limited, my confidence was unbounded. I was fond of management, and eager for authority, and that either would be misplaced in my hands never occurred to my buoyant views. With my seventeen years of wisdom and an untold amount of self-reliance, I was, in my own eyes, the proper person to be placed over the household.

"Father," I pursued now, "please leave the children with me while you are away. I am certain

I can manage them. You know Fred is to go to a tutor in the mornings, and surely I can teach the others, and look after them too."

"You must speak to your mother about it, Ellie," was the reply. "She and your aunt Rachel agree that it would be better to have a governess."

The mention of my aunt's name completed my resolve. I was off in a bound from the drawing-room, flew up the stairs, and had soon gained the apartment overhead where my mother was busily engaged in the process of packing. Her sweet face looked paler than usual, and there was a very troubled expression on it which the little worries attendant on present operations could scarcely have called up.

Again a feeling of doubt, melancholy, and mysticism overcame me, and I could only throw my arms round her neck.

"Mother, why are you leaving us?" I cried. "Don't—don't go away!"

She returned my embrace with her warmest clasp, but then, with some resoluteness, she checked emotion, and asked me to help her with the folding of a silk dress.

"Ellie, dear, this journey is a necessity," she murmured. "Let us not discuss that, but what changes it involves. Your aunt has mentioned a very excellent lady to us, who would take the regulation of everything in our absence."

"Not of me, I hope," I interposed warmly. "I

thought you would have trusted me more than that, mother. I shall be lonely in any case, but I shall be quite wretched if you give me nothing to do. Why cannot I continue lessons with the younger ones? And as to other matters, I have watched you too long not to know how to jingle a bunch of keys and give a good dinner."

"But perhaps not a homely one, which is what you will want," said my mother, checking the expression. "This unexpected expedition will put your father and me to a good deal of expense. Carefulness must be borne in mind for some time to come."

The word "unexpected" was what caught my ear here rather than the implied economy, and my curiosity was alive anew. But it was in vain to probe my mother on this point. She arrested all inquisitiveness with a calm reticence which was impenetrable. I had to fall back upon the former argument, and assert my capabilities of foresight and frugality with an eloquence which finally won my cause—that is, in a measure. The governess institution was abandoned, but Aunt Rachel was brought in as a terrible substitute. She was to keep guard over us all, but I was to house-keep; she was supposed to inspire awe, I to instil instruction. In fact, she was to be the head, I was to be the hands. The arrangement did not quite suit my views, but it was better in some ways than the first proposal. I was allowed a slight scope for the display of my talents, and I determined to merit

approval and applause. It never occurred to me that I might miss both. A failure is only pictured to the eyes of humility.

The day of departure came. There was beautiful June sunshine without; the air was full of warmth and fragrance, and the carol of happy birds. But a shadow fell on everything for a while as tears veiled the prospect of summer joyousness, and only the sound of farewell echoed in our ears. We children had all gathered together in the portico when the travelling-carriage drew up, and the excitement which the event of a departure always calls up in the youthful mind was held in check now by a species of expectant awe. My father's adieu was hearty, though hurried.

"God bless you, my darlings," he said; "and keep you safe and well till we meet again."

My mother was the last to come out on the steps. Had she not been absorbed very evidently in some thought connected with this strange voyage and distant journeyings she could scarcely have been so composed. As it was, she gazed at the waiting group with almost dreamy intentness, caught each in turn tightly to her heart, and then with a quick, even resolute step, followed my father to the carriage. Lucy, the youngest, was the only one who moved her at all. Fred lifted up the child for a last kiss, and as the curly-headed pet, with big tears on her pink cheeks, wound her dimpled arms around mamma's neck and

sobbed to be taken with her, my mother leant from the window, and her eyes sought me.

"Ellen, Ellen!" she called out with quivering voice, "take care of my little Lucy!"

It was her parting word, and it struck on me somehow with a half pang. I may as well confess at once that I had jealousy to face as one of my foremost foes, and it proved often a very combative one. The cold elongation of my name now, coupled with the more loving mention of the little one, roused the feeling at once, and for a moment the blank of loneliness, the pain of separation, were scarcely so present as this torturing throb. But they returned all the more keenly afterwards, and with an added sadness. I understood and allowed that my mother was only carrying out my own wish in making me in a degree independent of her care, and remembering another who stood in need of it. If her fondness did not show itself in a last anxious thought for me, could I blame any one but myself? If I constituted myself the first in one way, and chose to stand strong and self-confident, I must become secondary in another. I could not expect in their fullest measure both trust and tenderness.

I was roused from reverie by the voice of Aunt Rachel. She was calling to me from the library, where she held herself ensconced in a sort of chair of state. The parting for her had been borne stoically in the seclusion of this retreat, and she signified her



pleasure now to have us all marshalled before her for a kind of roll-call.

Aunt Rachel was scarcely a favourite in our circle. She was too full of oddities to fall in easily with a child's fancies, or accommodate herself to juvenile tastes. Her dress even was against her. It was formed on some principle of rainbow effects, which was more curious than captivating. I have often wondered why such dreadful dyes are invented and awful articles manufactured, but wonder must cease on view of the chosen garb of my aunt Rachel. Her pet gown was a mixture of orange and green silk ; and, as she generally adopted crimson in her cap, it is superfluous to add that her presence was formidable.

When we answered her summons on the present occasion I, of course, headed the procession. Next to me came Fred. He was three years my junior, but his age, or rather his youth, did not intimidate him. He was a daring boy, full of spirits and audacity. The love of teasing was his governing principle as yet, the champagne of his existence, kept always at high pressure, and ready to be let off at unexpected moments with explosive effect. Merylle, who followed close upon his steps now, was the nearest to him likewise in age. She was just thirteen, but scarcely looked so much, being round in form and rosy in face, quite a chubby child in fact, instead of a slim, steady girl as she ought to have been.

Fred was so fond of her and she of him that he

could make her do just what he pleased, and as his movements were not always worthy of imitation this touching affection was of dubious excellence.

A space came again between Merylle and Dick. The latter was only nine, but, seeing what he was, I might have spared the "only." To have been older would have been deplorable disgrace, with his wild ways and blackened face. Dick, I lament to say, was seldom clean. He had always a smudge somewhere, acquired by some mysterious and infallible process of his own which baffled prevention or detection. In fact, one word will suffice for Dick. He may be simply and vividly described as a "pickle."

George, aged seven, was a solemn child. He spake little, but ate amply. He had large dark eyes, which were not particularly expressive, and pale—somewhat puffed—cheeks. The quest of food was plainly his one object in life at present, and he followed it with a devotion worthy of a better cause. I always thought my mother indulged him too much in this way, and I had sketched out a scheme in my mind for raising him resolutely to a more elevated tone of being.

Lucy, the youngest little darling, has been already mentioned, and as she was the pet and plaything of the household, I need scarcely say that she was lovely and endearing. Indeed, she was the only one amongst us with any "hints" of beauty. Merylle might develop into anything ; but, as she stood now, a dumpling was the nearest comparison to be found for her; and as to

myself, too high a colour and too low a forehead, too thick hair and too thin a figure, gave me a grotesque air, as if I were top heavy, and needed some proper ballast to the system.

Aunt Rachel viewed the array set before her with scrutiny, even suspicion, as if we were already in a state of insubordination. As we were not so, but rather meek and depressed, the imputation was irritating, and Fred resisted it in the way most natural to him.

He began an expressive action with his eyes, twirled his fingers into some apt imitation of aunt's head-gear, and caught a foot surreptitiously round Dick, all but sending him flat upon his face. Merylle gave a feeble titter, and aunt pounced upon her forthwith. She was rather afraid of Fred.

"You unfeeling little girl!" she exclaimed. "Are you actually laughing? and your dear parents only driven from the door! They are driven fast from your thoughts at all events. I don't know what children of the present day are coming to! The very name of my grandmother was enough for me."

I did not quite see the connection here, or how the name of grandmother was to bear upon the memory of a mother. However, Aunt Rachel had evidently satisfied herself with the utterance. She struck her hand emphatically on a table before her, and seemed to think a climax had been reached.

"I will take them off to their lessons," I interposed,

assuming the authority I pined for. I might not have gained it at once without an intervening lecture, but for a favourable conjuncture. Aunt, luckily, had her pug to attend to, and as this duty occupied the first precious moments of the day, she let us depart with a groan.

"We are to have a holiday, to-day; mamma promised it," said Merylle, the moment we were outside the door.

"Only a half one, as I understood it," I rejoined, "and Merylle, I believe you are a heartless little girl. Would you really wish to go and play at once?"

"And would you really wish to go and teach?" she retorted.

"That is a different affair," I began hotly, but Fred stopped me.

"I tell you what it is," he exclaimed. "We will start for the hay-field, take our books with us, and read under one of the ricks. That's not out of course—eh, Nell?"

I scarcely liked to let the law pass so quickly from my hands. Still, to begin with contention like Aunt Rachel was worse policy again, and I yielded assent.

"We will bring Lucy with us," added Fred, catching up his cap, and popping something like a battered mushroom on Merylle's head. "You can have Dick and George."

But this was too much. To leave me this dreadful remnant of the family while he surrounded himself

with the more choice members was dethronement at once. I felt my face in a glow.

"You shall not have Lucy," I broke out excitedly. "She has been entrusted especially to me. The boys I will hand over to you with pleasure."

Dick shrank from the offer, and put a blackened finger appealingly on my arm. He stood in wholesome dread of Master Fred, who teased him unmercifully. As to George, whatever he felt, he could utter nothing. He had already an immense bun in his mouth, a parting gift from his mother. But for the sake of the donor he should not have demolished it in peace, but I could not find it in my heart to check him so soon. The matter was ended by the disappearance of Fred and Merylle in close partnership, while the three little ones were left in a touching group around me. When I entered the schoolroom, and had placed them on high chairs by the table with picture-books spread out before them, I felt that I had done my part for the present, and I subsided into a sort of reverie. From this I was roused by a call from Aunt Rachel.

"Ellen, have you seen about dinner?" she demanded. "Remember it is to be at two o'clock in future. And Flossy is not very well to-day, so you had better order spring chickens, and then he can have a bit of the liver."

Had I been partial to lap-dogs this suggestion would have been too much for me. As it was, I had

no love for a plethoric pet like Flossy, and I determined that for that day the feathered tribe should, one and all, prolong their existence, even if his were shortened thereby.

I liked the sound of the keys as I trotted along the passage with the big bunch at my side, but I did not particularly relish what they opened the way to. The store-closets were well stocked, it is true, but I found it wearisome work weighing out and tidying up, and no longer wondered at the time my mother had bestowed upon this duty. More than once I had called to her impatiently when she was in the midst of her operations, and had thought it tiresome she could not come immediately. I had said to myself, at such times, that I could get through the process much quicker. I would have no consultations with the cook, but would give forth my mandates clearly and concisely. If I had substituted for these terms "obstinately and obtusely," I should have been nearer the mark, at all events according to my coadjutor's reading of them. I decided smartly enough what we should have for dinner, but as the joints specified did not happen to be in the larder, not much way was made here. Cook was mistress after all—not only suggested but governed—settled the dinner and me too. I thought I might hold a higher hand when we came to the sweet-meat department. Surely a "trifle" was not beyond me? But I had just awoke to the humiliating fact that even here ignorance prevailed, and that the dish could not

be produced without preliminary notice, when an awful scream reached me from the schoolroom. The glass bowl I outheld might have been reeling under tipsy-cake already, it tottered so helplessly in my hands. Fortunately the cook caught it from me, but I came into undignified collision with her at the moment as I sprang wildly over the threshold.

The voice had been Lucy's, or it might not have moved me so much, and I was breathless when I reached the schoolroom. The first vision was George with another bun puffed into his cheeks, and his eyes as vacuous as ever. His food supply being uninterrupted, no change could be looked for in him. Not so elsewhere.

Dick seemed to have quadrupled his limbs in a mad scramble over the table to compass or conceal something. I need scarcely say that he was blacker than ever, for a huge ink-bottle had been upset, the contents streamed abroad, and he was arresting their course bodily. In a first panic he had caught at Lucy's head as a mop. Her pretty curls were besprinkled and bedabbled, and she was in a torrent of tears.

I could not help it—I had made a vow against corporal punishment, but it was broken forthwith. In a second I had seized Dick, and boxed his ears soundly. I did not come spotless out of the transaction. There was a stain on my white cuff, and the thought that I had yielded to passion left a deeper

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blot behind. Often had I felt impatient with my dear mother for her forbearance, and had fancied more effect could be gained by peremptoriness, but the thought of her calm sweet face was a reproach to me now.

I was flushed and panting, Dick was howling, and Lucy's woe, instead of being appeased by my action, was doubly aggravated. She was a gentle child, and could never bear anything of a disturbance. To punish another was almost as bad to her as personal chastisement.

When the fracas was in a measure abated I be-thought me of my open store-room, my incomplete arrangements, and had to rush off again. The result of inexperience was a dinner behind time, appetites before it, servants out of sorts, and Aunt Rachel out of patience. Other matters fell out adversely too. Despite the lateness of the repast Fred and Merylle appeared at it with not only unsmoothed hair, but with sundry hay-straws adhering to it in porcupine fashion. Aunt bristled at the sight, and a passage of arms would have been imminent, had I not rushed in to their rescue with apologies and assurances.

"This has been a holiday, aunt," I said; "and they are making the most of it and the sunshine. Tomorrow you will see what better order we shall be in. I will look after them well."

The promise was easily spoken, but my own heart failed me, even as it was made. Already I missed



the gentle ruling hand which did everything in love without noise or anger, and recognised how inadequate was mine to replace it.

When I retired to my room at night, I felt a few tears stealing from beneath my lashes as I looked out through the open window on the summer prospect which had grown lonely, and saw a sort of veil of sadness stealing over each well-known object. Something was wanting, something was absent when the "good-night" of loving parents had not a lingering echo in my ears. Silence became oppressive, solitude haunting, and I only slept at last by the oft repetition of my evening hymn.

"The day is passing from me,  
But night hath no alarms,  
For Jesus is my Guardian,  
He holds me in His arms.

"In shade, in happy sunlight  
No change shuts out His smile,  
When eyelids close full wearied  
Love waketh all the while.

"And I will trust Him truly,  
Though darkness groweth deep,  
He watching over Israel  
Will slumber not nor sleep."

## CHAPTER II.

### NEW TO THE WORK.

"Hope rules a land for ever green ;  
All powers that serve the bright-eyed queen  
Are confident and gay ;  
Clouds at her bidding disappear ;  
Points she to aught ?—the bliss draws near  
And fancy smooths the way."

WORDSWORTH.

I ROSE the next morning braced and buoyant. I had undertaken a duty and I meant to perform it. So far, all was well. But my confidence had not departed. It had yielded in no way to humility. My own strength seemed sufficient for me, and I went forth in it anew.

During the absence of the heads of the household, it had been arranged that we were all to have our meals together, and at the children's early hours The dining-room, however, was substituted for the nursery ; and the little ones, being enfranchised so far, became unduly elated. George, it is true, remained solemn as ever ; but as his gravity had a close affinity to greediness, I scarcely rated it very high.

Aunt Rachel appeared in gloom, a dread weight upon her brow. Even her cap seemed sombre, and nodded ominously. Black lace had replaced white in it, and the red ribbon had faded into purple. Flossy had not recovered yet, and was borne in tenderly in a basket. I saw that aunt eyed Fred closely and suspiciously, and wondered what was wrong.

He, smiling as ever, settled himself at the breakfast table with some preliminary attention to Dick, which left him shaky on his high chair. I had been glowing with pride hitherto. Dick was spotless. His "overall" uncrumpled, his hair shining, his cheeks fresh as a rose. But at this juncture his mug of cocoa went over him instantaneously. I think the catastrophe rather relieved him. The unnatural strain of tidiness was too much for his repose.

Aunt Rachel, however, rose in a fume.

"This is intolerable!" she cried. "Who could sit at table with such children?—one and all are the same. Some one fastened a cord to the bottom of my door last night, and when I opened it this morning Eliza, the housemaid, was nearly taken off her feet. The strings stretched everywhere."

"It wasn't *me*," exclaimed Dick impulsively, and his mug was just gone again.

George was speechless, but then that couldn't count for much, seeing that his cheeks were distended, and a thick slice of bread and butter had already vanished from off his plate.

All eyes were turned on Fred.

"It was you, sir—I know it!" said my aunt fiercely.

"I—I was working out a mathematical problem," began Fred; but I stopped him at once.

Now or never I felt that my authority must interpose.

"Fred, I am ashamed of you!" I exclaimed. "I wonder you would be such a baby as to play pranks like these. You promised your father you would behave quietly and rationally. You were to help me, he said."

"Oh! and what prodigies have you been up to, Nell, that I was to bear a hand in?" was the retort. "Lucy was crying all the evening, George more crammed than ever, and I seldom saw Dick such a pickle. He was too much of a blackamoor even to torment."

I felt my ire rising, but checked it. To enter into a controversy with Fred before all the juvenile party would have been an undignified proceeding, and one involving a possible defeat. Fortunately a diversion was caused by the appearance of the letter-bag.

A few lines came from my mother, announcing their arrival as far as Liverpool, and Aunt Rachel got two lengthy epistles from maiden friends, which occupied her till the conclusion of the repast. Family prayers followed then, and Aunt Rachel, with spectacles on her nose, seated herself before the big Bible. The children were always orderly at such times, and

I had them in a steady row before me, when Fred suddenly broke the ranks.

Aunt was feeling about for her footstool, which seemed an indispensable adjunct, as giving her a more enthroned air, and I was glad to see him attentive in pushing it towards her.

But at the moment an awful yell broke forth. Aunt leaped from her seat, and Fred gained his in a bound. She had put her foot full upon Flossy. The pug had crept out of his basket to the soft cushion, and this was the support proffered so eagerly by Fred.

Commotion followed, and aunt's wrath was so terrible that I had finally to read the chapter myself. When it was ended I took Fred seriously to task. But his spirits were beyond depression by rebuke, and I had to give him up in despair.

This was the day for him to begin work with his tutor, and I could only hope that mental exercise might tame him in a measure. Mr. Locke, the gentleman with whom he was to read, had only recently settled in the neighbourhood. He was the new curate, and had taken a pretty cottage about half a mile distant from Crystal Lodge. His engagement to a young lady in his former parish was at once announced by our rather garrulous rector, and it was an understood thing that as soon as he had obtained pupils enough to add a proper increase to his income, his happiness need no further be deferred.

None of us but my father had seen him yet, and as Fred was to go to his house, it was not probable, at all events at present, that we should know much of him. Aunt Rachel did not approve of gentlemen on the whole, and though an engaged man carried an air of safety with him, still his bachelor's degree clung about him, and he might at any moment become a "Master of Arts."

Fred started punctually for the cottage, the novelty of the thing having attraction for him as yet; and once his perplexing presence was removed, I gathered the children around me gravely in the schoolroom. Dick was supposed to be "bright"—not in his person, it is superfluous to say, but in some inward nook of his mind which could not come in contact with external soil. Arithmetic was his strong point, and to this he begged to be set now, though I quailed a little at the prospect. I was weak in the line; figures presented themselves to me more formidably than an array of artillery, and if he caught me tripping, I was prostrate at once. To shoot ahead of me in ciphering was fatal to my rule—in fact, to make a cipher of me. However, with the help of a "key" I might hold my own, and Dick was posed presently with an immense slate before him, and an excruciating cutter.

Merylle I steadied on the piano-stool with a shake. It was the only way of awakening her to a sense of work and duty. Dear little Lucy had not much to do as yet; thus only one member of the party remained

to be looked to. But a glance here was enough. When I turned to George, he seemed utterly hopeless. His eyes were more meaningless than ever, and his mouth was evidently still full. As his hands were closed tightly over something, I loosened them per force and discovered a roll of bread surreptitiously appropriated from my aunt's plate.

When I took it from him he howled—howled piteously and persistently, and, in self-defence, I had to yield it up again to his clasp. George unhappily had been delicate as a child, and his life was at one time despaired of. The first symptom of recovery had shown itself in a marvellous appetite, which had never failed him since. My mother hailed this with such rapture at the time that her delight was prolonged and she could never bring herself to check it. But I determined in my own mind that if his illness were a thing of the past this inordinate state of hunger might be relegated to the same regions. I brought him up to my side for a geography lesson now, and plied him so closely with questions that all his organs were kept in play, and devotion to his favourite work was impossible. But he grew pallid and helpless under the process, and I began to feel that it might be carried too far.

Meanwhile Dick's slate pencil was working agonisingly, and he appeared suddenly at my elbow with the most awful rows of figures, jotted down in maddening contiguity. He had erased them more than

once with his sleeve, after a previous approach to his face, and his nose and lips, if not exactly black, were at all events leaden. I was glad in one way of the smears everywhere, for they afforded me cause for rejecting the production with indignant recoil.

"Take it away!" I exclaimed. "How dare you bring me up a concoction like that? Learn to be tidy, whatever you are."

"It's a sum in decimal fractions," said Dick, imploringly; "and not a figure wrong. I've gone over it twice."

"That I have no doubt of," I rejoined. "It's just what's amiss. I'll have none of that rubbing out and going over. Contrive to bring it right the *first* time. Be clever, correct, and, above all, clean."

With these words I waved him off, and turned resolutely to the piano. Merylle had been strumming busily at her "exercises," but whether the fault lay in them or her manipulation, music was wholly absent from the performance. It was loud, almost defiant in its noisiness. I had just given her a tap over the knuckles to tone her down, when I heard my aunt calling to me.

"Ellen," she exclaimed, "you are forgetting the dinner."

And so I was. In haste I left Merylle and all to their devices and sallied forth. I encountered aunt on the threshold of the schoolroom, and begged of



her to show herself within, and keep guard in my absence.

She consented with a groan, but scarcely had she entered than a peal of laughter greeted her. In some fluttered attentions to the pug she had set her cap awry, and with it the front beneath. A corkscrew curl was over her left eye, and a grey lock peeped out on the opposite temple.

"Oh, Aunt Rachel, what's happened to you?" cried Dick. "You do look so queer!"

Aunt, I believe, went over and shook him, but this was hazardous work, considering the state of her head-gear, and it might have been wiser to forbear. I had thoughts at first of reappearing on the scene, but really I had so many reproofs to give on my own account, I decided it was as well to let aunt fight her own battles.

Later on that day a species of calm was restored. Fred had returned from tutelage a little sobered, and I had brought the rest into comparative training. Thus satisfied and reassured, I permitted play to the young ones without, and ensconced myself in a window-seat in the library, with a book in my hands. I had my own reading to think of, and it had been rather neglected of late. I was deep at the time in "Macaulay," and I resumed with pleasure now my interrupted perusal of a charming essay.

Only a few minutes, however, had elapsed till an arrest came. It was in the form of a ring at the hall

door. We had not many visitors, and I was running over our "list of friends" in my mind when the library door opened abruptly—that is, a slit admitted espial, and Fred's eye gleamed in.

"Old Locke's come!" he said. "He asked for 'Miss Wynham,' but that means you—not Aunt Rachel. Be off to him, Nell."

I rose from my seat, pushed my curls a little smoother off my brow, but did not dare to proceed further. Aunt Rachel, I knew, was in the drawing-room, and to appear there unsummoned before a gentleman-visitant was out of the question. Suddenly I heard her step in the passage, and she sailed in to me in a flutter. She had on her crimson cap, and there was a marvellous gold brooch fastening a rainbow tie around the "neck" of her green silk gown.

"The new curate, Mr. Locke, is here," she announced. "He has asked for the young people, so you had better come in. Remember, Ellen, he is engaged," she added sternly, as if she were confiding to me some solemn fact which concerned my own future.

I could scarcely keep my countenance, and I fear when I appeared in the drawing-room there was none of that meek gravity about me suitable to the occasion. I had settled beforehand that the gentleman would be tall, spare, and bowed, with scanty hair and subdued features. The clerical presence, viewed through the medium of our rector, Mr. Horton, had

always impressed me thus, and surely one who combined the duties of master with those of pastor must inevitably be reduced to a physique of the kind. The actual vision, however, was a perfect contrast to my portrait. Mr. Locke was of erect bearing, and showed no signs of emaciation yet. He was healthy and hearty looking, with a frank open face and clear grey eyes, which met mine with a pleasant glance of greeting.

"This is the eldest girl," said my aunt patronisingly, as if I were still in pinafores. "The others have got loose, and there is no saying where they may be."

"I think I could give a good guess," returned the curate, smiling. "I saw some moving hay-cocks as I came up the lawn, and caught merry voices from beneath, which betrayed the cause of the phenomenon."

"Of course they are in mischief wherever they are," said my aunt. "Pray, how did the eldest lad get on with you to-day? You must have had a sad task with him."

"By no means," said Mr. Locke. "He is a very 'bright boy.'"

"But does he know anything?"

"Certainly he does. He is far advanced for his age."

The answer was not what might have been expected. I have heard it said that a new instructor feels himself bound to give a low estimate of what he has taken

in hand as a standing-point from which to measure future progress. Thus Mr. Locke's candour had the greater merit. The verdict was too favourable, however, to please Aunt Rachel, but of course the gentleman could not know that, and he pursued pleasantly :

"I consider that he has been very well and carefully grounded. May I ask what school he has been at?"

"Papa taught him," I exclaimed delightedly.

"Yes ; and a great deal too much for him it was," croaked Aunt Rachel. "I only wonder his health stood it so long. It is well he was able to take this change now."

I started at her words, and something of a new pain shot to my heart. Was it possible my father was unwell? Was this the explanation of the mysterious voyage and absence?

"Papa, he is not ill?" I ejaculated, and in my eagerness I sprang from my seat.

"Sit down, Ellen," said my aunt reprovingly.

The want of dignity in my motions shocked her, and she looked almost aghast. My anxiety, however, was greater than my decorum, or rather than her desire for it, and I repeated the question.

"But is there anything wrong? Do tell me, Aunt Rachel!"

"There is something very wrong in this impulsiveness," was the reply. "You saw your father as lately

as I did, Ellen. There is no reason to get into a panic."

The answer might have seemed evasive from any one else, and have quickened alarm. But, remembering Aunt Rachel's tone of mind, and her tendency to throw blame upon us at all hazards, I felt in a measure reassured.

Mr. Locke had the good taste and tact to give a prompt and pleasant turn to the conversation, and I felt grateful to him for the good humour into which he beguiled my aunt before he took his departure. He told us of a school-feast that was to be given in some neighbouring grounds on an early day in the next week, and hoped for our presence and assistance on the occasion. He charmed Aunt Rachel by an expression of his confidence in her powers of aid and organisation, and she acquiesced with an unwonted alacrity. In fact, whatever else he might prove to be, Mr. Locke was a genial discreet man, and surely praise must attach to any one who helps to smooth matters in life. There is a joy in sunshine which warms and gladdens, and that which comes from a cheerful heart is as welcome as the beams in nature. I fancy people pride themselves sometimes upon ruggedness as a test of sincerity, and think honesty is only compatible with harshness. Poor Aunt Rachel seemed to have leanings to the impression, but it was evidently a wrong one, judging by the effects. I can already to understand that "the law of kind-

ness" is that which leads. Any other method must evoke resistance and rebellion.

Scarcely had Mr. Locke made his adieu than I sought once more the company of "Macaulay." But I was not left long to the enjoyment of our *tit-te-tit-te*. Fred, full of his tutor, broke in upon me suddenly.

"Well, Nell, what do you think of him?" he exclaimed. "Isn't he a brick?"

"I don't know about that," I laughed. "But he has cemented a friendship with Aunt Rachel, at all events."

Fred uttered a low whistle.

"I only hope it may last," he murmured, "and my fortune's built up. I've got the clerical ear already, but Aunt Rachel's is too deaf a one to gain without the aid of a speaking-trumpet."

"And what have you in view, Fred?" I demanded, for I saw that some plot requiring mystery and manipulation was brewing in his thoughts.

"Never mind, Ellie," he returned, with a gleam of his brown eyes. "If it's a secret, I can't tell you; and if it's none, find out for yourself."

## CHAPTER III.

### IN THE OLD MANOR-HOUSE.

"If solid happiness we prize,  
Within our breast this jewel lies,  
And they are fools who roam.  
The world has nothing to bestow,  
From our own selves our joys must flow,  
And that dear spot—our home."

N. COTTON.

IN the midst of minor thoughts and troubles I had an important matter to keep in mind. This was a visit to Uncle George. It had been one of my mother's last and most emphatic charges to pay this call of duty on the fixed day of the month which was always devoted to it. Uncle George lived the life of a recluse, but he did not like to be neglected. He made no attempts at sociability which involved trouble on his side, but I think he looked all the more anxiously for those tokens of remembrance from without, which we can few of us dispense with.

To check the expressions of love and kindness is often to create a void in the heart which renders it

restless and requiring. We none of us care to feel alone, however exclusive we may be in shutting out unwelcome intrusions.

Uncle George surrounded himself with gloom and solitude, expecting at the same time that others should be anxious to break in upon them, and that, however he might forget, he should never be forgotten. His abode was an old manor-house, situated on the outskirts of our nearest market-town. The dwelling-place was like himself, built up in a rigid seclusion. A high wall, surmounted further by a trellis-work hung with a thick veil of foliage, hid every vestige of house and garden from the road. The wooden gate which gave access to the enclosure they occupied was always locked, and when the bell outside was pulled, a sort of startled thrill rang through the lonely mansion, as if it were bound in a spell like that of the Sleeping Palace, and were awakening from a trance of prolonged duration. The portal once opened, a tall man appeared in dingy black, or peered, rather, through an aperture which seemed to repel instead of invite admission.

I had heard it whispered that uncle was a miser, and certainly, if he were not poor, he was unquestionably penurious. There was nothing hearty or hospitable about his surroundings. The servants looked ancient and attenuated, the rooms were cheerless—filled in winter with a thin atmosphere of smoke emitted from unkindled fires rather than with the



glow of warmth and geniality. Considering this state of things, a visit in the summer-time was more enjoyable, and I braced myself up for the venture now with a proper amount of confidence.

There was not only a stated day for our reception at the Manor-House, but a fixed hour. Three o'clock was the time. It was supposed luncheon or dinner would be finished then, tea would be in the foreground, and no refreshment need be offered. My mother had directed me to bring all the children—all except Fred—he was a significant exception. However it were, whether the cause lay in reason or prejudice, the presence of my eldest brother was prohibited. For years he had not seen Uncle George, and his name was never mentioned to him.

Fred bore the deprivation beautifully; in fact, at times he was apt to wax jubilant on this score when he saw us all marshalled in ominous procession towards the stern habitation. There might be duty in the proceeding, but assuredly he saw no pleasure in it.

One fair summer morning which rose refreshed from a night of rain, I made preparations for the excursion. I advanced our early dinner to a still more primitive hour, that we might have time for the drive of five miles afterwards.

I gave the children a half holiday, hoping it might induce in them a more amiable frame of mind in which to meet the coming ordeal. But I believe the indul-

gence had disastrous effects. With emancipation from rule came the excitement of mischief.

Before the starting hour arrived I was aghast at their state, and Aunt Rachel was tragic. Dick had fallen into the duck-pond, George was so crammed with gooseberries that he could barely stand, and even little Lucy had contrived to tear a new frock, and scratch herself in the bramble-bushes. Merylle looked rather plumper than ever, but that I could scarcely attack her for, so she escaped with comparative immunity.

Punctually at two o'clock our old-fashioned carriage was drawn up. It was a big, roomy vehicle with a rumble at the back, and was thought best suited to the undertaking we had in hand. By force of physical exertion I collected the children thereupon in tolerable trim and temper.

Aunt Rachel stood in the hall to see us off, but she was terribly cross, for she looked upon this visit in which she was to have no part as a sort of evasion of her authority. Uncle George Merlin was my mother's brother, and it seems as if connections by marriage too often contract a cold distrust of one another. Furthermore, an added cause of dissension entered into this case in the unfailing apple of discord.

Money matters, I have remarked, come largely into the question of matrimony, no matter what start love may have had in the affair. Such had brought their necessary train of evils at the time of my parents' marriage. Uncle George was supposed to have be-

haved unhandsomely in regard to the settlements made upon his sister, and Aunt Rachel had never forgiven him.

"I think this is a most absurd expedition," she exclaimed now. "Are you certain, Ellen, that your father wished it?"

"Mother did, at all events," I said. "She gave me strict injunctions not to neglect to go, and I am sure my father would not like her wishes to be disregarded, whatever further care he may have in the matter."

I announced this with a certain amount of dignity and resolve, for I felt that there was an injustice in checking me in the path of duty, especially before the children.

Aunt Rachel was always interfering with me, and the course was irritating, to say the least of it. It had been intended she should help, not direct, but without open discussion it seemed difficult to place matters on a fair footing.

When we had driven off I was so vexed for a few minutes that I could not speak, and I neither saw nor heeded what was around. But anger surely is a mistake. It troubles and disturbs the breast too much to be long indulged in. Happily in its meditative stage it cannot injure others, but it takes due revenge upon ourselves.

"Ellie, what makes you so silent?" exclaimed Merylle at length. "We must begin to be naughty or you will be stupid."

I roused myself at the words. The alternative was so possible a one that it excited vigilance, and this was a more salutary state of mind, restoring a healthy action to the circulation.

I had put Merylle and George on the front seat, and kept Dick and Lucy, one on either side of myself.

Properly speaking, George, by right of juvenility, should have been more directly under my wing. But after his feast amidst the gooseberries I looked upon him with disapprobation. Despite of the probability of a black smudge on my sleeve, Dick's proximity was preferable.

We reached the Manor-House and its stern portal without adventure, and while the coachman reined in the horses, I sprang out to pull at the bell. I started at the moment, and a faint scream escaped me.

A hand had come over mine, and grasped the handle before me. The action was affrighting, savouring of some spiritual manifestation, and I glanced quickly around. If no ghost or goblin were there, the vision was quite as terrible. I saw the curly head and round mischievous eyes of my brother Fred. He had been in hiding in the rumble, had just leaped from it, and was ready now to present himself first of all to the forbidden presence. I was so frightened I could scarcely articulate, but my face showed my feelings.

"Oh, Nell, don't look so awful!" exclaimed Fred

with a laugh. "Why should I be put out of the running and neglect my duty to the old gentleman? I don't care what you say or think, it's prime good of me to come."

In the emergency I dropped anger and authority. Persuasion I felt was the only course.

"Fred," I implored, "don't show yourself. You know it mustn't be. Mother said it. Would you disobey her because she can't see or stop you now?—and she so far away from us!" and I almost broke down at the words.

By this time the gate was opened, and the thin butler, more raven-like than ever, stood in the aperture. My voice trembled so when I asked for Uncle Merlin, that the whole proceeding grew ominous, and I heard George groan.

These visits were trying times for him. The air of chill and famine which pervaded everything was intensified in his case by the dread reality of the thing. The absence of all food, or the very sight of it, for an indefinite period, was a heavy ordeal to go through. Feeling that this was the one wholesome thing about the whole transaction, I had little pity for him, but Fred thought good to make himself officiously sympathetic.

"Cheer up, old boy," he said, as he went forward and lifted him from the carriage; "I'll be there to-day, and see if I don't conjure something out of the cupboards."

At this threat I grew absolutely pale. Yes, constant as was my colour, it deserted me now.

"Fred!" I cried wildly, "if you play tricks like that, you will be the death of us all."

A peal of laughter was his esponse, and, in despair, I was about to re-enter the carriage and abandon the visit, when he caught me by the arm.

"What a goose you are, Nell!" he exclaimed. "Do you think I'd pop into the lion's mouth when I've something else to pop into mine? There's a stunning cherry-tree in the orchard yonder. I know it of old—and mother always let me have a climb—it's there I'll hang out."

George opened his eyes at the words. Meaningless as they ever were, there was really appeal in them now.

"Take me!" he murmured. "Oh, Fred, take me!"

But I seized him resolutely.

"You little gorger!" I said, "I wonder shame wouldn't shut your mouth. Come with me this instant."

Marshalled sternly in front, I got him along thus; while I gave a protecting hand to Dick and Lucy on either side. When we were on the doorstep, I heard a whistle from Fred. Turning, I saw him using some pantomimic gestures expressive of a touching farewell and compassionate solicitude for our fate.

George groaned again, and I had to give him a

little prod with my parasol to keep him steady in the vanguard.

The butler, meanwhile, had been unbarring the front door. It was so seldom opened that the process was a tedious one, and we stood awaiting admission a full minute before it was granted. We were ushered at last into the library, the accustomed retreat of Uncle George. The apartment, I need scarcely say, was gloomy. The hangings were faded, the carpet threadbare, the blinds yellow. In a nook near the fireplace stood a deep leathern chair, dark and dingy in its hue, and in this was sunk the spare wizened form of our host. Books surrounded him, dust likewise. From ceiling to floor the room was crammed with fusty old tomes, and they were ranged further in piles in his vicinity, shutting him off into a sombre solitude. They were indeed almost the sole furniture of the place, and often it was difficult to find seats apiece for his small guests.

His first act on our entrance was to put on his spectacles, throw himself further back in his chair, and scan us all round.

"You are Ellen," he said, fixing his piercing little eyes full on my face.

And then he went along the row, naming each in turn, and emphasizing every identification by a scrutiny so sharp that it was almost like a stab. Uncle George was twenty years older than my mother, and the disparity in their ages was further increased by

the very different natures of their minds. Uncle had become worn and ancient beyond his time by the force evidently of a harsh acid spirit ; while, in my mother's case, sweetness and simplicity had kept alive the freshness of an unsullied heart.

I had been always a little afraid of Uncle George, but somehow I trembled before him now. He had not been told of my mother's departure, and she had directed me to convey the intelligence of it as casually as I could, without naming, if possible, her distant destination. As I stood in hesitation, he signed to me to approach.

"Come nearer?" he exclaimed. "What are you all keeping back for?"

But scarcely had we made a movement in response than there was as sudden a check. George, heavy and awkward, had stumbled over one of his favourite tomes, a big illustrated "Shakespeare."

"You little imp!" cried my uncle ; "what are you about? Can't you keep your feet for a moment? You all look very odd to-day," was his next remark. "I believe there's something wrong. Where is your mother?"

"She has gone away," I murmured ; "just for a while, and my father with her. They have left Aunt Rachel with us."

The mention was unfortunate. He hated Aunt Rachel, and showed it in a scowl.

"And what does she do?" he demanded. "Does



she punish you with a rod as well as her presence?"

"That she doesn't!" broke in Dick. "I'd like to see her touch me. She daren't try it on, even with a shake. Her cap wouldn't stand it."

At this speech a ray passed over the dry countenance of Uncle George, and if his books had not been still a formidable barrier, I think he would have given Dick a pat.

"Sit down," he said then, and made a motion with his arms which referred us to the most distant regions within view.

His eyes never left our faces all the time, and presently I was put through some cross-questioning which heightened my colour, and raised in a corresponding measure uncle's curiosity.

"And you don't know what your mother is gone away for, Ellen?" he pursued after prolonged queries. "That's queer. A girl of your age isn't a baby."

"I am not treated as such," I said, a little warmly. "I am entrusted with the care of all the family now."

"I thought you said Miss Wynham was? Little as she's good for, she has not been tacked on as another child to the number, I suppose?"

"She is to help, of course," I stammered. "But I do all the teaching and housekeeping."

"Enough for you, if you do it well. I won't say you make a *poor* hand of it, for I dare say it's the very contrary work you're at. Riot and richness are more

in your line. I never saw you all look worse. George is positively green."

"That's the gooseberries!" exclaimed Dick. "He's been at them all the morning."

"And pray, sirrah, what have you been about?" retorted uncle sharply. "Do you know that your nose is quite black?"

Dick instantly put up a hand to feel, and this fatal act accomplished his disfigurement. Whatever state his face might be in, his fingers were rarely to be trusted. I had had him spotless a few moments before, and how he acquired his favourite embellishment it would have been difficult to say. Possibly from the mere proximity to dust, he had attracted it magnetically.

Everything seemed to go wrong now. Lucy's scratches became painfully conspicuous, and my own visage was preternaturally flushed. None of the tokens escaped Uncle George. His eyes were far-seeing as a ferret's, especially when he helped out their power of observation by the addition of his gold-rimmed spectacles. I had been proud of my party, but I could be so no longer. It was evident that a mother's hand was missing from our midst, and that my vaunted management had tumbled down of itself. It was a relief at the same time to find uncle veering from curiosity to correction. The latter was safe ground, most obvious and assured, and involved neither mystery nor evasion. He had wide scope

here for prolonged excursions, and he exercised himself most thoroughly thereon.

In the midst of some vehement declamation there was a dreadful crash. I looked around me in trepidation. Had George tumbled? What had happened? All seemed the same, but the noise was unmistakable.

Uncle's eyes flashed, and turning, he rang violently at the bell. I never saw such agitation in his countenance before. Something more strong than irritation had moved him. It was a dark, terrible wrath.

"What is this?" he cried. "Some one is in the house. Who has got in?"

I trembled instinctively. Yet surely we were guiltless. The downfall had been elsewhere, not within the range of our destructiveness at all. Uncle must have believed it too. Yet still his eyes rested on me with piercing scrutiny. I began to feel conscious, if not criminal. A fatal fear had sprung to mind—the proximity of my brother Fred.

The next moment the butler opened the door.

"Willis," said my uncle; "give me your arm at once."

He was going to rise, then. This was a portentous action, only resorted to on memorable occasions. Confirmed gout had for many years rendered him incapable of independent movement, and his chair in the library was set on wheels, so that he could make the round of his favourite bookshelves as he had need.

"What has happened?" I whispered anxiously to Willis, as he raised Uncle George with difficulty.

The answer was a mere gesture, but it was expressive of something dire. He shook his grey head, and seemed to point with his eyes to tragic results.

Meanwhile there was another startling sound, and a bell rang now, rang wild and loudly through the old house. Little Lucy crept closer to my side, and frightened by the whole proceeding she put up her pretty lip and gave a little cry.

"What's that?" broke out uncle passionately. "Don't howl! Don't dare to let me hear you here!"

I checked her with a clasp, and she grew subdued in a moment. George was placid as ever, and Dick seemed rather to enjoy the growing excitement. He had taken advantage of it to run his fingers along a margin of enticing dust he had espied, and his eyes glittered with delight. As uncle reached the doorway, he turned, and seemed to relegate us to some state of nonentity. It was evident, at all events, that we were not to follow him. But my interest in the matter was too compelling. Signalling to the children to remain behind, I stole close on his footsteps.

The butler, still helping my uncle, led the way direct to the broad oaken staircase that conducted to the second floor. Strange to say, I had not been in the upper rooms of the Manor-House more than once or twice in my life. When a child, I remembered a

day of play in the long corridor off which they opened, and I had been allowed a peep into some ancient apartments which had large massive beds, gloomy hangings, and tall oval mirrors set in ebony frames, that reflected a rather awestruck expression on my own face.

Uncle was a widower, and I knew that his wife had died suddenly in one of these dusky rooms. He had kept the body from burial beyond the accustomed time, and I was always picturing to myself some ghostly scene of sad sombre significance.

Later on, an incident had occurred which I could never properly fathom or comprehend. My mother, on the occasion of one of our visits to the Manor-House, had been in great agitation and distress. She was closeted with my uncle for a considerable time while we children were packed in waiting in the carriage outside. When she came back to us, there were tears in her eyes, and it was at this juncture that Fred had been prohibited the house, which he had not re-entered since.

Willis paused at the staircase now, but uncle motioned angrily to be brought further.

"Not here!" he said. "The other way—the back-flight."

Thereupon we passed through a green baize door and traversed a narrow passage towards the servants' apartments. Just as we had gained the end, I heard a footstep, a hurried desperate rush, and descried

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some one tumbling, rather than springing, down a steep stairway which faced us. My heart almost stopped its beatings when I saw who it was.

It was Fred—flushed, panting, and with his curly crop of hair in a sort of mad excitement. He caught view of Uncle George, and pulled up on the last step. For an instant he gazed, dazed and irresolute. Then, like a stag hunted and harassed, but not yet brought to bay, he turned and fled. Up the old staircase he flew faster even than he had come down, and pursuit at this pace was of course impossible for his uncle.

But a roar escaped the latter, deep and defiant, and I knew that it breathed a vengeance which was following after. Mingled terror and indignation at beholding Fred on the forbidden ground overcame me wholly now, and I shrank back in dismay. I could not brave anger for one who had betrayed trust, and placed us all in such an equivocal position. I felt that my place was best with the other children, no one could tell to what exploits they might be led in my absence. Even now I thought I caught a cry from Lucy, and in eager haste I darted back to the library.

## CHAPTER IV.

### WHAT BECAME OF AUNT RACHEL.

"It was a fairy summer,  
The plants from dew sprang up ;  
All things, all thoughts reflected  
The gold of buttercup."

I DID not see uncle again. I had gone out with the younger children to settle them in the carriage, thinking it the safest place for their deposit, when Willis appeared with Fred at his side.

"You are to go, miss," said the butler ominously. "The master can't admit any one again to-day."

Fred mounted at once into the rumble. I took my place inside, and not a word was spoken, even after we had driven off. Lucy was the first to break a protracted silence.

"Ellie," she said, "I've frightened."

"Not now, my pet," I rejoined. "Uncle George is not strong, and should not be worried. Fred has acted very wrongly."

"But what did he do, Ellie?"

That I could not answer her yet, as far as particulars were concerned, but disobedience had certainly entered into the case. And so I intimated, as explanation enough of all wrong-doing. I was longing on my own part to question Fred, for curiosity naturally prevailed in my mind as much as annoyance. When we had reached home, and he had descended from his perch, I saw that he looked almost subdued. Sending the children into the house, I asked him to come out with me to the garden. He did not demur, but there was no quickness in his movements, and his eyes were not raised with his usual audacious glance of inquiry.

"Fred," I began, after a moment's silence, "you have behaved very badly to-day. But I need not tell you that. You must know it yourself."

He fired up a little then.

"I did nothing," he said ; "nothing to be so badgered about. I don't know what kind of house that is, or what sort of old wizard is at the head of it. It's the last time I'll put my foot in it."

"I hope so. You need not give that out as a menace of your own. It was forbidden to you long ago."

"That's all very fine," he exclaimed. "But why should I be made a black sheep of, I'd be glad to know?"

As he was getting irritated, I considered it better to leave that matter in abeyance.



"I know Uncle George is strange and fanciful," I said. "But, Fred, you ought not to irritate him. What was it you did to-day?"

"I was only hanging about," he said; "just watching for you to come out. I saw a side door open, and I thought I'd step in and call to Willis to bring me a tumbler of something to drink. There wasn't a cherry on the old tree, I had got hot climbing, and was as thirsty as could be——"

"Well, Fred?"

"Well, the passage within didn't lead, as I thought, to the servants' rooms. It took me round by a queer covered way to the foot of a back staircase. When I was so far I looked about me and called to the butler. He didn't answer me, but hearing a footstep somewhere, I ran up the flight of steps. At the top there was a door covered in scarlet cloth and studded with big brass nails——"

Fred paused again, and another query had to incite him to a conclusion.

"And you opened it?" I inquired.

"Well, yes, I suppose so. That is, I pulled and pushed at it for a minute or two, but it wouldn't yield. All at once it partially gave way, and there was a thundering noise. I was half frightened at first, but then I felt curious and tried to go further. I had seen nothing as yet, for the door was but half open. As I got it fully ajar a wild clanging sound rang out, and I knew that I had touched some cord which had set a

bell in motion. Almost immediately afterwards I heard footsteps, and uncle's voice, and I stood irresolute, not knowing whether to go on or come back. In the end I nearly jumped into his arms."

"But, Fred, you turned and ran up the flight again," I interrupted. "What did you discover then?"

"Nothing, Ellie, not a thing; I give you my word for it. There was only the long oaken corridor before me, leading to the bedrooms. I dashed along it, and came down the front way, by the big staircase. Willis caught me at the foot, and bundled me out at once."

There was not much in the story to satisfy inquisitiveness, but it was all he could tell me; and, not wishing to have a scene before Aunt Rachel, I passed over his delinquencies lightly. Dick, nevertheless, had a tale ready for her ear ere we could reach the house. I turned off inquiries as well as I could, and George, who had been speechless, of course, was rewarded with an extra lump of sugar at tea-time."

The next day was that settled for the school-children's feast which we had promised Mr. Locke we would give our countenance to.

When the morning arrived the weather had changed to excessive warmth, and I determined to keep the children indoors until the afternoon. We were not to set out for Wayland Abbey, the scene of the festivities, till between three and four o'clock, and I decreed

that lessons were to go on as usual. The novelty of the task had worn off for me by this time, and I must confess that it cost me an effort to set about it. It was the more provoking, therefore, to find that the rest of the party looked upon it as a sort of gala time for me, and felt that they had a right to lessen its triumph by perplexities and perverseness. If *they* were kept under subjection, they thought, I suppose, that a little wholesome discipline would be good for me too. At all events, they were giddy and tiresome.

Merylle pounded at the piano in quite a ferocious style. Dick presented me with rows of figures which turned my brain at the first glance, and George, in spite of every precaution, had always surreptitious stores at hand, and an incessant munching went on which drove me almost distracted. In the effort to avoid boxing him on the ears, I had to have recourse to vehemence of another kind, and more than once I brought my own hand down with such force on the table that the latter tottered, and I winced. There was always a laugh then, and I had to bear this as well as the cause of it.

The heat on the present occasion wrought matters to a warmer pitch than ever. The schoolroom was stifling. Each struggled against restraint in the longing to catch a free breath: one and all clamoured for air without exercises.

But a half holiday had been conceded the day be-

fore ; the results had proved disastrous, and I stood out firmly now. Suddenly I missed George. Merylle had been in tears over her French, the big drops ran copiously adown her roseate face, and her plump cheeks looked so piteous that the aspect was quite comical. Engrossed with the task of subduing her first and soothing her afterwards, I had not kept a clear eye on George. He was generally heavy in his movements, and I did not anticipate a flight from him. Yet gone he was, and leaving the others, with a premonitory shake of head and hand at them, I sallied forth in his quest. In the hall I encountered Aunt Rachel.

"Here's a nice business !" she exclaimed. "George has gone and tumbled into the currant-wine vat. I heard screams, and Eliza has just fetched him out half drowned."

I was both shocked and solicitous, but that did not satisfy Aunt Rachel. It was plain that in some way she attributed the catastrophe directly to me.

"You are keeping him too low, Ellen," she said, "and of course he prowls about then. A child can't be stopped suddenly in his food in this way. I hear you checking him whenever he has a morsel in his mouth."

I am afraid I gave some hot answer, but the weather alone would have excused it, and aunt might have done the same. A retort, however, on her side was what succeeded, and we were on the verge of dis-

pute when luckily the first bell rang out for our early dinner.

We met next over the board, and had each of us toned down meanwhile by the aid of cooling toilet manipulations. George was in his place as usual in a clean pinafore and with his hair well brushed, but decidedly lank, and I could scarcely help smiling when I saw him looking as stolid as ever.

A day of perfect sunshine is rather a rare boon in our tearful climate, and should be prized accordingly. Yet cloudless as it is in nature, it often finds shades elsewhere. Nothing satisfies some people, and Aunt Rachel, who was rather rubicund, grumbled dreadfully about the oppression. Even when she was settled in the carriage, and we were driving along the avenue beneath an archway of trees, she broke into murmurs.

"There isn't a breath to be got!" she exclaimed. "I don't know what is to become of us if it goes on in this way. We shall all be stifled."

"I like it," said Lucy, who had a soft composed skin that never flushed beyond its shell-pink.

"You like it because you're lazy," retorted aunt. "If you had something to do we should hear another story from you."

Lucy was rebuked forthwith, and her dark fringe of lashes fell shyly on her cheek.

I gave her a little pat, but unfortunately in doing so I brushed against Aunt Rachel, who was on the same seat.

"Keep still, Ellen!" she cried. "Don't crowd up like that! You want to have me choked, I think."

When we arrived at the Abbey, we found delicious shade under some spreading lime-trees, and here the school-children were collected. The rector and curate came forward to receive us.

"You look cool here," exclaimed aunt more amiably. "What we have suffered on the road between sun and dust is beyond words."

"You should have been on the box, aunt," broke in Dick, who had had his perch up there. "You must try it going back—I'll let you have my place. It's a jolly high one."

The generous offer only elicited a frown; and, indeed, the picture it called up of Aunt Rachel, puffing and important, seated beside the fat coachman, was one to be sternly repressed.

Despite the heat, aunt accepted a position presently before a tea-table. She was led up to it in state by the rector, Mr. Horton, and there was a certain dignity about the proceeding which brought balm to bear upon it.

I for my part was willing to assist, but there were too many matrons on the scene to allow an opening for my services, and thus it came to pass I was left inactive. I caught a glance ever and again from Aunt Rachel's eye, and knew that she viewed me with distrust, and the expression deepened to one of

displeasure when she found that Mr. Locke had strolled up to me.

"I must ask you to help us in the games by-and-by, Miss Wynham," he said. "The children are hungry now, but we want to make them happy presently. I don't think feasting alone can lead to that result."

"No, indeed!" I exclaimed heartily.

A vision of George's dull, passionless face was before me, and it represented to the full the insufficiency of the "stuffing-system" to extract spirits.

"This day of amusement is a new event for the children," I remarked. "A Christmas-tree has been thought incentive enough hitherto for their studies."

"A sufficient lift to the 'Tree of Knowledge?'" laughed the curate. "For my part," he added, "I not only feel that it is good to be 'merry and wise,' but I think the two qualities must go in combination."

"That is a delightful opinion, Mr. Locke—for the young ones, at least. Would you advise me to adopt it? I have got a small family under my charge just now, but I thought the more they were kept down the more hope there was of them."

"That would depend on the mode of 'keeping down.' I should not imagine it was a very severe one in your case."

"I am afraid good-nature misleads you, Mr. Locke. I assure you it doesn't blind *me*, as regards the

faults of others, at all events. I believe I am a hard task-mistress. Ask my brother George, or Master Dick."

Mr. Locke's eyes glanced around in search of the pair, and of course they were discovered at some mischief, real or presumptive. Dick was hanging from a tree in an appalling attitude of danger, and George, who had clung close to the bun basket from the first, had each cheek distended to a full-moon circumference.

"You see their tastes, Mr. Locke," I exclaimed. "One pines for peril, the other for pabulum. Their tendencies are terrible. I can neither endure them, nor eradicate them."

"And what about my friend Fred?" inquired the clergyman. "He is no trouble, surely?"

"I am glad that is your experience," I returned. "But I regret to say he is not to be trusted either. He teases my aunt—indeed all of us. I only wish his tasks were more lengthy and difficult. They might tie him down a little."

"He is doing very well at present, Miss Wynham. I have no fault to find. His lessons are always carefully prepared."

"Then set him something harder. Please do, Mr. Locke!" And I grew quite beseeching in tone and gesture.

I was brought back to demureness by a sharp call. The voice was Aunt Rachel's, and looking round I saw her beckoning to me imperatively.



"Ellen! why are you not helping?" she exclaimed when I approached. "See how active I am!" And she waved the tea-pot somewhat menacingly in my face. "We did not come here to amuse ourselves. You should remember that."

"Miss Wynham is going to organise our games for us," interposed Mr. Locke, who had followed in my footsteps. "If she will kindly do this, it will be a real boon. It is easier sometimes to make people work than play."

"Only when they are shy, Mr. Locke," I exclaimed laughingly. "My experience would scarcely carry out that doctrine. Though, indeed, you are possibly right as regards orderly games. The play, I mean, is a species of wild destructiveness. That they all take to instinctively."

I said this with an air of wisdom and superiority which might have passed muster but for the presence of Aunt Rachel. She determined to reduce me at once to the same level as the untutored tribe I referred to.

"You should show them a good example, Ellen," she said, "and then more might be looked for. I expected to have found you all helping now, but instead of that every one is scattered, and thinking only of amusement. There was plenty to do, if you would have done it;" and again she seized the tea-pot excitedly. It was as well she had nearly exhausted the contents, or I should infallibly have had a dash of them by way of demonstration.

Discussion was ended now by a motion on the rector's part. He had risen to say grace, and as the feasting came to an end with this, Aunt Rachel could scarcely prolong her demands upon me.

A short distance from the scene of the recent repast there was a beautiful slope of velvet turf with a fringe of evergreens around, and thither we repaired for the continuation of the entertainment.

Races, Friar's ground, the magic circle, all followed one another in merry succession, and the school-children, after the first start, enjoyed themselves unrestrainedly. In the midst of my attentions to them I was kept in perpetual dread of my own flock. Dick's activity was terrible. He was only happy when he had some one linked in an iron grasp, and was dashing at mad pace adown the incline. If there was not a fall at the bottom he looked upon the whole thing as a failure, and was off for another trial.

The turf being soft I did not view the proceeding as fatal, but all at once I was startled by a cry. It came from one of the little girls of the party, a delicate, pretty child of about eight years old. Dick had treated her as summarily as the rest, had given her a sudden swing as they gained the bottom, and she fell with force, one of her feet being doubled under her.

I rushed to lift her, but found that some agonising strain had rendered her incapable of motion. She moaned when I touched her, and the schoolmistress, who had come quickly forward to assist, had difficulty

in raising her even in her arms. It was plain that no relief could be given by us, and that she must at once receive some surgical attention. Fortunately our carriage stood ready for departure, and I begged that she might be lifted into it and driven to the doctor. The mistress offered to accompany her, and the child indeed would go with no one else. I was so pained and distressed at the whole occurrence that I was only anxious to do anything in my power that could atone in a measure for Dick's giddiness.

It did not strike me for a moment that aunt could have any objection to the course. But it appeared she wished to get home now ; the party was breaking up, and she grew suddenly impatient. The carriage could not be expected back within an hour's time, and the rector had to come to our rescue in an offer of seats. He managed to pack the children in somewhere amongst the others, Fred set off walking, and room was made for Aunt Rachel in the rector's wagonette. I was the only one left, so to speak, in the lurch. But it was merely for a moment. A tiny dog-cart of Mr. Locke's made its appearance presently, and I was courteously proffered a seat here. I accepted with thanks, and mounted into position beside the gentleman. He seemed to have rather a spirited steed, but that gave me no concern, as I was free from fear, and rather enjoyed what is termed a dashing drive. We were all starting fairly when I heard a call. Aunt Rachel, who had been engaged in

the process of muffling herself in a dust-cloak, had only just espied the last arrangement. It gave her a shake which unsteadied us all. In a second she had popped out of the wagonette, and was in chase of our vehicle.

"Stop, Ellen," she cried ; "stop, Mr. Locke ! I will go with you !"

There was a small seat in fact at the back, to which she mounted with bewildering alacrity. I would have yielded up mine in front, but the pony was frisky, and it was thought wiser to have no further changes.

Mr. Horton had followed her and settled a rug over her knees, and she professed herself quite comfortable. She had the grace to apologise to the gentleman for her sudden desertion, which she said had been induced by a fear of overcrowding him.

"I did not know there was another mode of conveyance," she added. "This will do admirably."

The too-radiant sunlight had become subdued now. A soft mellow haze enwrapt the dreamy landscape, and as far as the eye could reach there was nothing but a slumbrous quietude. All seemed sinking into that dewy cradle for rest and refreshment whence an awakening comes in the joy of morning. The change worked sympathetically on our minds as well. Instinctively, we subsided into silence, and we drove on some distance before almost a word was exchanged. I was the first to break a pause.

"I hope the accident to little Ruth may not sig-

nify?" I said to Mr. Locke. "All had gone on so pleasantly until then; it was most unfortunate it should have happened. I warned you about our boys. It was wrong of me to allow them to take any active part in the proceedings."

"You must not blame yourself, Miss Wynham," he returned kindly. "With every precaution and consideration, accidents will occur. Your little brother has been crying almost ever since. It won't do to be too hard upon him."

"There would be no fear of that if the punishment were left with you," I replied. "You seem wonderfully forbearing. I should be only too glad to be the same, if government could go along with leniency. You are clever, and I dare say can accomplish the combination. I am not so."

"How can you tell I am clever?" he questioned smilingly. "You are giving me credit for too much—ability and amiability both. I have had little experience in the direction of young people as yet, and it remains to be proved if I possess either quality."

"But you manage Fred, Mr. Locke."

"I manage to instruct him, you mean. He is too far advanced in boyhood not to be amenable for the few hours he is with me."

"Ellen," said Aunt Rachel suddenly from behind, "what are you talking about?"

She was a little deaf, and I bent my head towards her reassuringly.

"I have been asking about Ruth, the little girl who was hurt."

"We have arrived at children in general now," added Mr. Locke.

Aunt seemed satisfied from this report that the conversation must be supremely uninteresting, and she left us confidently on such a safe track. The drowsiness in the air affected her, I think, and she relapsed into silence. The curate and I had passed gradually into other topics of conversation, when the pony gave a little bound. The rumbling of a cart had frightened it, and it quickened its pace for some distance.

"You were not startled, I hope?" said Mr. Locke, when he drew rein again.

"Oh no," I replied; "I like fast driving."

We were near home now, just at the gateway of Crystal Lodge. The dusk had come on, and I looked round with some remark to Aunt Rachel. A cry broke from my lips as I did so. The seat was empty. Not a vestige of anything was left—rug, cloak, occupant, all had disappeared.

"Oh, Mr. Locke!" I exclaimed; "what have we done? What has become of her? Aunt Rachel is gone!"

"Gone!" he ejaculated; "it can't be possible!" and his face took a look of puzzled concern.

"Yes, yes; but it is so," I pursued distractedly. "Don't you see for yourself? What are we to do? Where can she be?"

We had turned round already, but the long road that faced us seemed blank and silent. With Aunt Rachel's form on it, it could not have worn that aspect. Safe or suffering, her presence would infallibly have been made known.

"When did she go?" asked my companion anxiously.

"How can I tell?" I broke out. "Do you think I knew, Mr. Locke? Oh, do do something! We must get her."

Thereupon we dashed along at an even faster pace than at the runaway moment, and it was with difficulty I could cling on in my own position now. Ever and again I thought I heard a call somewhere, and half turned in my seat, expecting to see Aunt Rachel back as mysteriously 'as she had vanished. That she should have gone so silently was alarming in itself. There was something too unnatural about a disappearance like this.

My eyes, strained to intent watchfulness, were misled each instant by any semblance of a form. The very trees by the roadway took her aspect in the gathering gloom, and seemed beckoning and gesticulating to us. In the midst of its tragic element something comic stole into the situation. My repeated exclamations, "There she is! there she is!" when nothing but a milestone or bramble-bush was within sight, almost brought a smile to my companion's face. He was startled and solicitous all the

same, and seemed, like myself, to stand equally in dread of the discovery or non-discovery of the lady.

Wherever she was, it was certain she was indignant, if not injured ; and though company, equipage, seat, and all had been her own choice, still it appeared to our apprehensive minds that we *must* be to blame.

At last we came to a standstill. There was something like a cloud by the roadside, as if a floating fold of the soft bluish canopy overhead had rolled down unawares. But this cloud rose into distinct dimensions as we stopped, and we saw that it was Aunt Rachel. Her grey cloak was still loosely around her, but it had not guarded the rest of her person from a regular bath in the powdery surface of the road. She was dust from head to foot, and there was no occasion to ask if she were hurt, seeing that the protecting substance had fully enveloped her, and shrouded her from any harder contact.

She was too choked to speak ; but she signalled to us with a motion which brought a cloud into our own throats.

I sprang down instantly, helped her to mount into the front seat, and then took the perilous perch behind myself. The action propitiated her, I think, for her first words were less alarming than I had expected.

"How did it happen?" she murmured. "Why did you leave me?"

"But we didn't, Aunt Rachel," I said. "You left us. We have been in such a fright about you."



Mr. Locke confirmed the soothing statement, and in his presence she restrained herself from reproaches.

We kept to a more steady pace now, and the gentleman gave her his sole attention for the rest of the drive. This put her into good-humour, and when we reached home a vigorous brushing did away with the most dire effects of this last accident of the day.

## CHAPTER V.

### THE GOLDEN SCEPTRE.

"Dare to be true, nothing can need a lie ;  
A fault which needs it most grows two thereby."

GEO. HERBERT.

ANOTHER week passed over, and we were daily expecting a letter from my mother. It was possible to have news of her and my father now, announcing their arrival in New York, and my anxiety grew painfully great. Longing and loneliness had visited me of late, and I often awoke in the night with a sense of desolateness which the deep, dark silence around was not calculated to dissipate. The blank left in the house by the absence of both parents nothing could fill up. In occupation or recreation it made itself equally felt, and the touch of time, which brushes the starting tears from most sorrows, only deepened their source here. All the interest attached to the offices of housekeeper or schoolmistress had quickly evaporated. I had seized upon them too eagerly, and

exhausted their novelty ; and, having failed in many things, the accompaniments of pride and confidence were gone too. Still I tried to set about my tasks regularly, and to let the consciousness of duty fulfilled take the place of pleasure. But it was like a change from soft summer airs to the ice of winter, and had a correspondingly chilling effect.

"Ellen," said Aunt Rachel one morning, "you are getting quite dull. Is there anything wrong?"

"There has been no letter from mother," I murmured, half averting my head. "I thought . . . I was sure we could have heard before this. The time seems so long."

"You must not grow impatient," was the soothing reply. "Keep yourself busy as I do. Look better after the servants and children, and the hours won't hang on hand."

I saw there was little sympathy to be expected here, and determined to make no claim to it. As aunt's labours lay chiefly in the line of herself and her pug, I scarcely felt called upon to profit by her example ; but there was no use in explaining this to her.

Fred was giving me some concern just now, and I turned my thoughts to him. I had had a suspicion that some plan verging on forbidden ground had been concocting in his mind, and this notion rose into certainty when I found an astonishing change come over him. He had grown quiet, positively harmless ; and,

much as I objected to his freaks, this state had its disquietudes too. What he meant by it, what he expected to gain by it, were questions which I pondered on in vain. It could not be without a motive, for his health was unshaken, his spirit unbroken still. I could see ever and again the same mischievous gleam in his eye, subdued only by prudential resolve, and I felt that he was ready, on peculiar provocation, to break through the enforced control he had set over himself.

He went regularly to his studies with Mr. Locke, and that gentleman, on the occasion of a visit he paid us, spoke in the highest terms of the steadiness and studiousness of his pupil. The symptoms were getting alarming, and I was watchful accordingly. On this very morning, when I was depressed by the absence of news from my mother, he came back from Mr. Locke's, tossing his cap in the air, and giving vent to a "hurrah !" which was decidedly distracting. He had burst into the schoolroom, and the children were unstrung at once.

Dick let his slate drop with a crash, Merylle spun round on the piano-stool, her scattered music flying after her ; and George's mouth fell open till I thought some mysterious nutriment must inevitably be espied."

"Now, Fred, what is it ?" I exclaimed. "Don't interrupt us for nothing."

"Don't you look so cross, Nell," was his pleasing

rejoinder. "Mr. Locke's worth ten of you. He knows what's good for a fellow."

"I wish you would stay with him then," I said. "You are out before your time to-day."

"*You* are out there, Miss Nell," he interposed, referring to his silver watch. "It's only that I ran home quicker than usual."

"And why did you do that? We can always bear to await your arrival with patience."

"I dare say. But you see I must think of myself as well as of you. I have something to look to now in preparation for to-morrow."

"To-morrow! What is to happen then?"

"I am to have a whole holiday."

"For what?" I asked.

"Why, to go to the races at S——," and he named a neighbouring market-town.

"And pray who has allowed that?" I exclaimed. "Mr. Locke may give a holiday, but not determine how you are to spend it."

"Aunt Rachel has allowed it," he said triumphantly. "Now, what have you got to say?"

"That you are acting very badly," I pursued excitedly. "You have been cunning and secret from the first. You never told me."

I was jealous of my authority, and really angry that it should have been passed over so completely by every one. Had I been consulted I might have felt differently. These races were not of a very formid-

able kind, involving exceptional risks and temptations. They were promoted by some officers stationed in the town, and were quite of an amateur character, winding up with contests on foot. Still I was doubtful that my father would have approved of them for Fred, unless he went with some good and steady companion.

I was surprised at the part the curate had taken in the transaction, and could scarcely understand it. It appeared, from Fred's account, that he had seen my aunt in the village that morning, and had made the request of her in person. To me he had said nothing, though I had met him only the day before, and he knew that I was set in a kind of guardianship over the younger ones. Fred allowed that he had mentioned his desire for this indulgence to his tutor some time ago. Thus it was all the stranger that I should have been ignored in the consultations.

My annoyance grew greater every moment, and I declared positively that Fred should not go, and that I would get Aunt Rachel to issue her prohibition also. Just as I had worked myself into this state of passionate resolve there was a ring at the hall-door. Fred made a bound to the window, and his face changed expression suddenly.

"It is Mr. Locke!" he exclaimed. "What is he coming for?"

I noticed that he did not run forward, as was his custom, to admit him; but, annoyed as I was with

the gentleman myself, I could pass over the omission. I did not intend to honour him with my presence, but Aunt Rachel was in the garden, so I was obliged to go in. He looked so pleasant when I entered the drawing-room and came forward to me with such a genial smile, that I was constrained to be gracious perforce.

"You must forgive me for intruding so early," he said; "and still more I must ask your pardon for what I am about to say. I dare say I have no right to interfere, but it is only in the absence of your father that I venture to do so. Do you think it well, Miss Wynham, that your brother should go alone to these races at S——? If he were joining a party of friends it might be different; but——"

I could not help interrupting him with abruptness.

"You surprise me, Mr. Locke," I said. "Have you not only given him a holiday for the occasion, but even asked Aunt Rachel to grant the indulgence?"

The curate started slightly, and for a second he did not answer me.

"Well, yes—it is true," he pursued. "But you know there was a reason for this."

"No," I returned. "On the contrary, I am quite unaware that there was any."

His eyes met mine inquiringly.

"Was it not your wish?" he said. "I fully under-

stood that this day's recreation was long promised to him, and that no obstacle stood in the way but a possible objection from your aunt. Fred has been so good and attentive with me, I did not like to refuse—I know that it is not well to be too strict with young people. But on considering the matter over, since he left me this morning, I came to the conclusion that the amusement was a hazardous one, and that, as it was a new one in his case, it should be only sanctioned in the first instance by his father."

"Where is Fred?" I broke out impulsively. "I must see him at once. He must explain this himself. I never heard one word of his wishes or intentions till a few moments ago. You can understand from this how little I have had to say to the business, Mr. Locke."

I left the room even as I spoke, and found Fred lurking in the hall without. When I brought him in, his eyes fell before the tutor's, and the colour mounted into his brow. Yet it was very gently that Mr. Locke spoke to him. But Fred's own conscience was the accuser, and it is the hardest to meet of all. A few questions elicited from him the admission that he had coloured matters to suit his own views, and though Mr. Locke listened patiently his countenance showed a very grave concern.

"I am sorry for this," he said, "more than I can express to you, Fred. I did not think you would have wished to tell me an untruth."



Fred bridled at the words.

"I did not do that," he broke out boldly. "You should not say so, sir."

"What have I said?" was the calm rejoinder. "I have merely spoken of what you *wished* to do. Your lips could not follow actually upon your desires. But there is only a habit of speech here which I should be sorry to do away with. At the same time, can you see any clear distinction between conveying a wrong impression, intending it to be accepted as a true one, and the utterance of incorrect words? There is the same motive, wish, and will at work in both cases. Truth must be in the 'inward parts,' its influence so strong that the very countenance expresses it. It cannot change colour like the chameleon, and adapt itself to the varying lights of our own fancy. You make a grievous mistake if you think you have kept to it unflinchingly when you have gained your aim by misrepresentation."

Fred was silent, and his glance was no longer up-raised.

"My dear boy," pursued Mr. Locke, "I can make allowance for the impulsiveness of youth; and if this had not been a long-cherished plan of yours, I should not say so much upon the subject. But your sister here is very kind and good to you; you should not have sought to set her judgment aside, and gain your wishes by a subterfuge."

"It does not matter about me," I interposed. "The

point is, would my father have consented? Fred should think of that in the first instance."

"I dare say he would," muttered Fred somewhat defiantly. "He's not so hard as you make out."

The words and tone were equally aggravating, and I might have been led to some retort but for Mr. Locke's interposition.

He smoothed down matters with a prompt kindness, and before he took his leave he arranged that the holiday should still be granted, and that Fred should join him on a fishing excursion in the afternoon.

The next morning brought the expected letter from my mother. She wrote in good spirits. They had had a fine voyage, had arrived safely in New York, and hoped to return to us as soon as they possibly could. The very thoughts of this event brought a rush of joy to my heart. I jumped from my seat, and ran round the breakfast-table, giving each of the young ones an impulsive kiss of delight.

The action was ill-advised. Merylle had treacle on her plate, and was round and sticky as a lollypop; Dick's mug of cocoa shook hazardously; and George, arrested in the act of carrying a fresh slice of bread and butter to his mouth, absolutely whined.

"You are all the most dreadful set of children!" I exclaimed, returning somewhat brusquely to my seat. "Not one of you can be touched in safety. You are fond of nothing and no one but food. Disturb you

in that, and everything goes wrong. I don't believe you care an atom whether your father and mother are safe on the other side of the ocean or not."

"I shall care when they are safe on *this* side of it," said Dick sententiously.

"I doubt it, if breakfast comes in the way," I retorted, "though I must say you are better than George. You upset your mug at an interruption, but you are not upset yourself."

This remark, bordering on reproach, brought out a louder howl from George. My mother always declared he was very sensitive, but as I had failed to discover the tendency hitherto, I could scarcely be blamed for inconsiderateness.

"Do stop that child," interposed Aunt Rachel angrily. "Have you taken his bread from him again, Ellen?"

"Not she," said Merylle. "Just look at his plate, aunt, and you needn't ask!"

It was piled indeed to an amazing height, despite of the demolition of three pieces already.

"Then what is he crying for?" pursued aunt. "I never knew him mind anything before, if he had his full allowance."

"Ellie has hurt his feelings," said Fred.

"But if he has none to hurt, *how* can you make that out, Fred?" put in Merylle.

I, for my part, ignored the whole conversation, and gave myself up to the business of opening another

letter which awaited perusal. It was from Uncle George. I knew his crabbed handwriting, and the contents, of course, ran in the same vein. He wanted to see me, but I was to bring none of the children. I was to go to him alone, and at once—that very day—and be with him precisely at four o'clock.

Compliance with this request, or mandate rather, naturally upset some prior arrangements. I was to have taken the younger ones to a pretty wood to gather wild flowers, and to have indulged them with a picnic repast while Fred fished in a neighbouring trout-stream with his tutor.

The disappointment caused by the change in my plans showed itself in moodiness or unruliness, and the morning passed disquietingly. Fred, on his part, had a vexation to bear, too.

About twelve o'clock a letter arrived from Mr. Locke stating that he had been summoned unexpectedly to visit a sick patient in a distant part of the parish, and that as this call had interrupted his other work, he must defer the intended recreation to a less occupied day. My brother, like most impulsive lads, was irritable if thwarted, and the double frustration of his hopes of amusement on this occasion brought his temper more conspicuously forward. He muttered something in a very angry tone, and then set out for a ramble by himself. It turned out to be a prolonged one, for he was not in to dinner.

Punctually at three o'clock I started on the drive to

Uncle George's. Until I was on the way I had not thought of the races at S——, or that uncle's house lay exactly in their direction, at the very end of the town where they were to be held. Still, it was not likely I should meet with any difficulty, and having no fears about accidents with horses, or runaway trips on their part, I went on confidently.

There were crowds of carriages in the vicinity when we arrived. Their occupants had, for the most part, already left them, and proceeded on foot to a railed-in enclosure within an adjacent field, and from this I could hear great shouting and cheering as we drew near. Yet uncle's house, with its barricade of wood-work and evergreens, looked silent and secluded as ever.

When I alighted and rang at the bell, the wire might have been charged with an electric current, so sudden a thrill ran through me at the moment, seeming to pass inwards to the strange old house.

Willis answered the summons more promptly than usual, but his face wore a very ominous expression ; and when I asked if uncle were well, he threw up his hands and eyes in a most unnerving manner.

"Cannot you speak, Willis?" I said. "Is there anything wrong?"

"Master is waiting for you, miss," was his only reply, and stalking solemnly before me he led the way direct to the library.

Uncle was out of his chair when I entered, and that

posture in itself was alarming. He was grasping one of the ledges of his book-stands, midway down the room, and supporting himself on the other side with his stick. His gaze bent on me at once, and his eyes seemed literally to pierce through me. I wondered what was astray, what was amiss, for he was not utterly unreasonable, and he had never greeted me in this way before.

"Willis, bring me over to the window," he said abruptly.

There was a cushioned seat here, and the sash was thrown up, which, though an innovation in the room, was not an unwelcome one.

Uncle, indeed, seemed stifling. Emotion, if not passion, had wholly mastered him, and even when he was settled in his chair, and I had been pointed to a seat, he did not speak for a full minute.

I was too much in awe of him to open the conversation, and I only gazed out silently through the window upon the old-fashioned garden without, where the sweet scent of picotees and gillyflowers arose from high box-bordered beds. Rose-bushes were beyond, in their full and fragrant June beauty, the soft cheek of one flushing blossom falling caressingly against another.

The day was perfect, the sunlight golden, but chastened by a sort of slumbrous ecstasy. All lay under a tender mist of happiness. There are times when a smile seems to steal direct from heaven upon

earth, and nature, at least, throbs in response then, and gives back a glowing glance of gratitude.

The change from this prospect to my uncle's face was sad and startling. Nothing seemed to move him any longer in the fair world without, so wholly had some dark trouble within his heart shut out the influences of love and loveliness. He was built up in a solitude which no joy broke in upon; only the force of anger, as in the present instance, disturbed the stern barriers which he had set around himself. Suddenly he spoke to me.

"Ellen," he said, "I sent for you to-day to ask about your mother, to know when she is coming back; but I don't want to hear of her now. It would be better perhaps if she never returned; aye, never saw one of you again!"

The terrible words brought a cry to my lips.

"Uncle, uncle, don't say that!" I ejaculated. "What can you mean? What have we done?"

"All that you could—everything that is possible to bring wrath and woe upon your house. Do you know that your mother gave me her solemn promise that no son of hers should ever frequent a race? and at this very moment her eldest boy, the one to be most guarded of all—mad, reckless being that he is—aye, your brother Frederick, is in the midst of a betting-ring yonder, cheering and drinking with the worst of them."

I sprang from my seat, and an exclamation of dismay escaped me.

"Oh no, uncle!" I murmured, "don't say it! This was forbidden him—he would never go. It can't be true."

My agitation was so genuine that I believe he almost pitied me.

"It is quite true, Ellen," he reiterated; but his eyes had less of their piercing sternness. "It is perfectly unquestionable. Willis saw him."

Disregarding all my customary reserve and restraint, I ran out to call the butler.

He looked to me like a bird of ill-omen when he appeared in the passage. Blacker, thinner, more raven-like than ever, there was nothing to reassure in his countenance.

"He's there, Miss Ellen," he said, as I questioned him eagerly. "It's hisself is in it, an' not a doubt of it. D'ye think I could misknow his face, not to speak of his voice? It was upraised enough not to let one overlook it. He was shouting at the very top of it."

I had heard enough.

"That will do," I exclaimed. "You might have told *me*, Willis, and I should have been grateful to you for doing so. But why need you have acquainted my uncle?"

"He asked hisself—he did indeed, miss. He wanted to know if there were any of yours there, and I daren't never but speak the truth out. He'd soon pounce down upon me if I didn't. He can guess a thing quicker by your eye than another from your words."



If this was the case I had nothing to say, and I returned tremblingly to my uncle.

"May I send Willis for my brother?" I asked. "I must have him. He must come back with me at once."

"No!" he thundered. "I will have no one from my house going into that place."

"But Willis must have been there already," I ventured.

"He was not. Only on the road by the gateway, but he saw him from there. There were people wanted to have their carriages let into the yard, but I soon forbid that, and sent him out to tell them so."

Full of restless pain and agitation, I could not speak until I had formed a plan in my own mind, and then I rose hastily to take leave.

"No good will come of this day," was my uncle's farewell. "I wonder your parents would leave you like this—not one with sense among you. They should have put a hard governess at your head."

I remembered their plans and anxieties, and with what assurance I had repressed them, and there was a faint sinking at my heart. If anything disastrous should occur, could I ever forgive myself? I hastened forth as the thought rushed on me, and discarding the slow attendance of the butler I gained the gateway alone. I took the reins instantly from the coachman.

"Go in there, Thomas," I exclaimed, "and bring

Master Frederick out to me at once. Tell him I am here—and waiting for him.” And I pointed to the entrance to the broad enclosure where the races were going on.

“You can’t hold the horses, miss,” returned the man. “They start every instant at the cheering yonder.”

But I was not to be deterred by a risk of this kind, in fact it never presented itself to me as danger, and merely gathering up the reins in my hand, I stood by the roadside patting the horses. They knew my voice, and when I spoke to them encouragingly they grew gentle and steadied. Ever and again they would prick up their ears, but proceeded to no further action of alarm, and it was quite another kind of anxiety than care for their movements which occupied me during the moments of waiting.

At last Thomas returned, but alone.

“Where is he?” I broke out. “Where is Master Frederick? Why have you not brought him with you?”

“He is coming, miss,” said the coachman. “But he sent me on first. He was that angry I daren’t wait.”

Angry! Was that his part? I thought to myself, and it made me more indignant with him than ever.

He appeared after an interim, looking half-defiant, half-ashamed, and, as he mounted on the box beside Thomas, I had no opportunity of speaking to him on

the drive back. This was unfortunate in one way. I could have said a great deal, and perhaps in an effective manner, if I had been able to give expression to my feelings at once. Impulsiveness has a force at times which leads to heart-spoken utterance, and this, after all, is the surest weapon of reproach. Cold, cutting words only avail at rare moments, and in the case of peculiar constitutions, to effect the desired end. As regarded a boy like Fred, whose nature was still warm, and open to the sway of affection, they might rather have an injurious result. Yet these were what I indulged in later. And afterwards I relapsed into a silence which I determined I would not break till he had been thoroughly subdued and punished. I went so far also as to set Aunt Rachel in antagonism against him.

This step was not hard to accomplish, and for some days she and I left him in a sort of quarantine, holding no communication with him. The children readily took up their tone from us, and though they had learned none of the particulars of what had happened, one and all viewed him suspiciously, assuming an air of superiority and goodness which must have been more galling than anything. He on his part said nothing.

More than once I thought him sorry, and he crept up to me as if he were about to address me, while I caught a whispered "Nell!" on his lips. But I turned away unheeding at such moments. I had determined

in my mind that the longer he was left to suffer the better, and that it would be wrong for me to show softness or forgiveness till his expiation was complete.

The weather changed just at this time, and it rained so constantly for a couple of days that we could scarcely get out. Then a less sorrowful morning dawned. The skies had still a veil over them, but the rain had ceased, and in the afternoon I went out to do a little gardening in the front of the house.

I was bending over a flower-bed which showed a fairy crop of tiny green weeds on the surface, brought up by the recent showers, when my name was called. Looking hastily up, I saw Mr. Locke beside me.

"Don't stop your work, please," he exclaimed. "You are getting on so deftly and rapidly, it is a lesson to watch you. If you will allow me, I will stay and talk to you here for a moment."

I could scarcely refuse, especially as he pursued with only a slight pause :

"It is about your brother Fred, Miss Wynham, that I have been wishing to say a few words to you. He has told me all that passed, but he is really sorry for it. Will you not forgive him now?"

"He has sent you to intercede?" I said.

"No indeed. It is my own thought, entirely my own wish to come."

"I don't exactly know what you mean by forgiveness," I returned. "I dare say he would not value

mine. He has shown that he cares little about me."

"Forgiveness is simply what we all need," said the curate gently. "Faults are committed daily, hourly, but love can blot out everything. It is the feeling of this, the tender leading of this, which draws us back to the right again. Hardness any one can withstand, but not the powerful touch of tenderness."

I was silent for a moment.

"Then you think I should show no change to Fred?" I asked. "Is that what you would have?"

"I would show no change in *affection*," he returned. "As far as reproof has to be given, either in words or acts, you must be guided by your own judgment."

"Fred knows what I have felt," I broke out earnestly, "that it has been pain to me to treat him thus; but I thought it was the right course."

"Yes, I know that, or I should not have found it so easy to speak. You have been struggling against your own heart in your endeavour to do what you deemed best. To you, therefore, it will be no difficulty to turn to 'the more excellent way.' I need not repeat to you the words of the poet—'To err is human, to forgive *divine*.'"

I had stopped my gardening, and looked up in his face. The same kind smile which always lightened it was unchanged still, but there was more in it now than I had ever known before—a depth, a spiritualism, if I

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may so speak, which expressed something beyond geniality of manner. I felt at the moment that he would win one and all not alone to friendship for himself, but to heartfelt service to Him whose minister and messenger he was.

## CHAPTER VI.

### IMMORTAL YOUTH.

"'Tis the case with common natures,  
Use 'em kindly, they rebel ;  
But be rough as nutmeg-graters  
And the rogues obey you well."

AARON HILL.

A MOST astonishing thing happened now. Aunt Rachel determined to give a party—a juvenile one, no less. She gave me a shock to begin with, for the vision it called up was not reassuring. I could scarcely imagine her smiling benignly on a circle, and passing from one to the other with pleasant words of encouragement.

But she had got home a new dress, a gorgeous robe of summer brilliancy, and superabundant trimmings. She felt impelled to show this, and shine accordingly. Aunt was rather amiably disposed towards our rector and his wife, and she stated to me authoritatively that she would ask the whole of their family—eight in number.

A gracious codicil was thrown in to the effect that invitations might be issued on my part to some other children amongst our acquaintances, with the proviso that no boy over fifteen should be admitted. The *fête* was to be held out of doors in our pretty rose-garden, where tables and seats were to be arranged for the enjoyment of a delicious sweetmeat repast. So far the programme was promising, for I objected equally with herself to awkward lads of fifteen and upwards, and felt likewise that the freedom of the open air was an indispensable adjunct when she was to be mistress of the ceremonies. But in working out the plan collisions arose.

Aunt wanted to begin operations at three o'clock. I proposed five. It was well enough for her who saw as little of the young ones as possible to be thus generously disposed towards an early reception. But I, who was inseparably linked with the turmoil and troubles of children all day long, would have found a couple of hours of this additional work all-sufficient for every purpose of amusement.

However, I yielded up the point, but only to make way for another division. I wished to have tea as the beverage of the entertainment, but she declared this would fuss and heat her to an insupportable degree; and decreed in favour of claret-cup. It was in vain I represented to her that some of the little ones would neither like this, nor possibly be allowed it. She said claret-cup was not wine, and any one who thought so



had better drink off a tumbler of port and see the difference.

As this was a manner of settling the dispute which we could scarcely try with the children, I had to give in again. In the next place she had ideas of her own respecting the games that were to be organised. These views lay in the line of noiselessness and immovability. She had some vague remembrance of forming one of a row of stiff-backed figures, to whom was assigned the cheerful occupation of seeing who could remain longest silent, a forfeit being paid by the first one who broke into speech. This she considered a high-class recreation, and recommended it with warmth.

"When I was a girl it was our favourite pastime," she pursued; "that and 'Little Miss Midge.'"

"What is 'Little Miss Midge'?" I inquired anxiously.

A feeling of despair was beginning to creep over me at the prospect in view, and I grasped at anything that might be brighter.

"Don't you know it?" said my aunt almost angrily. "I can't imagine what you all do nowadays. You have got some new-fangled things on hand that no one can make head or tail of."

"You have not watched us, aunt," I ventured. "Try it on this occasion, and see if you won't understand us better."

But that suggestion was even worse received than my former query. The party was hers, she declared, and the pastimes should be her own too. As to the

mysteries of "Little Miss Midge," she would not unfold them till the proper moment ; but it was evident she expected then we should one and all be deeply impressed. Fred, who had regained all his spirits since I had placed him on speaking terms with me again, made sundry grimaces meanwhile behind her back which augured ill for his appreciation of the entertainment.

When the day arrived, it unluckily turned out showery, and this was a dash to the proceedings at once. Aunt, who was certain it would be sunshiny, had provided herself with an immense green parasol and a mushroom hat with a wreath of wild roses. She viewed these articles with asperity even when she saw the rain commence.

"Think of my wasting my money in this way!" she exclaimed. "I dare say the weather's broken for the whole summer now, but as long as I had only a bonnet it flared in my face fit to blind me."

"Make the hat over to Merylle," said Fred. "It's the very shape of her head, and looks as if it had been cut out for her."

He had laughed unmercifully at this crowning-piece of Aunt Rachel's toilet, and, unseen by her, had carried it round the house for exhibition on the point of his stick.

"Give it to Merylle—that baby!" cried my aunt indignantly. "She had better have my green satin gown at once."

"Indeed I think she better had," said Fred mischievously.

Whereupon Aunt Rachel swept from the room, her *châtelaine* and eye-glass making such a clatter by the way that the pattering of the rain was nothing to it.

Fred whistled.

"We shall have a storm now," he pursued, "and no mistake. Girls, have your waterproofs on. An umbrella, I think, will be my best defence."

"I wish you would not make her angry on this day," I rejoined. "It is all very well for you to laugh who have nothing to do. The trouble falls on our heads, and to have showers coming down on us also may prove too much of a weight."

"I believe they are providential," said Fred. "Fancy Aunt Rachel trotting about the grounds in that garb! We need have had no other amusements for the youngsters."

"That would have spared us 'Little Miss Midge,' then," said Merylle. "Do you know, Fred, I rather dread that?"

"No wonder. I have an inkling of what it is." And he turned up an eye.

"What is it?" broke in Merylle eagerly. "Do tell us, Fred?"

"Would you really like to hear? Well, you are to be tied hand and foot to begin with. We all dance in a circle round you, and try who can pull out the longest lock of hair."

Merylle gave a little shriek.

"You cruel fellow! I do believe *you'd* enjoy it. But, bad as Aunt Rachel is, she's better than you. It won't be that, at all events."

"I advise you to use your hands while you have them," I interposed, "or there will be punishment of some kind in store. If you don't do your practising a little more carefully to-day, I shall put in no plea against the tying process."

Thereupon Merylle vanished with promptitude, and I followed her soon afterwards to the schoolroom, the rest of the children marshalled in solemn procession before me. Too many holidays had been given to indulge them in one now, notwithstanding their rising excitement respecting the events of the afternoon. George seemed to be growing brighter of late, which gave me a feeling of great pride; and I reflected that if I accomplished a reformation in him before my mother's return, I should deserve a prize-medal for ingenuity. It was true he looked a little weaker in the body and less full in the face, but then his mind was strengthening and "taking in," and that was the great point.

It was rather hurried work getting lessons, dinner, and dressing over by three o'clock, but with strenuous efforts I accomplished the business, and had the children ready on the doorstep when the first carriage drove up.

The rain had ceased for the present, and every-

thing looked bright again. Crystal Lodge had gained its name from an ornamental glass portico in front, as well as a pretty conservatory which ran round on either side. The drawing-room and library windows opened into the latter, and it made quite a prolonged promenade on a wet day. The school-room and dining-room lay to the back of the house, which was just as well, considering the dangerous affinity of glass for the restless limbs of a boy.

I thought all was safe now, and was proceeding towards the rectorial party, who were alighting, when a crash fell on my ears. I turned in time to see Dick diving like a wild duck, and his cap cutting clean through an adjacent pane. But for the presence of the guests, I don't know what I might have been led to. His frightened face also deterred me. Aunt Rachel, at the sound, had rushed out of the drawing-room, and he was absolutely petrified with terror.

"I was only throwing up my cap to welcome 'em!" he murmured. "I thought it would look well."

No one could help smiling at his apology, emphasised by big eyes of cismay, and the rector interfered promptly in his behalf. Aunt Rachel only gave him one awful glance, and this, being nothing new, he was well able to bear it.

I was kept busy with arrivals now, and despite a grey cloud overhead, aunt proposed an immediate adjournment to the rose-garden. Fortunately there was a summer-house here, in which I had prevailed

upon her to have the repast laid out instead of on the sward, otherwise the discussion over the merits of tea or claret-cup might have been spared. We should have had water enough to satisfy every one's thirst.

We had scarcely arrived in the most open part of the grounds than a downpour came on, and there was a desperate rush to the shelter of the summer-house. Aunt Rachel's umbrella had gone up with a click, but several of the little ones had nothing but an airy parasol, and I felt impelled, under the circumstances, to set them running at full speed.

This, it seems, ruffled aunt in the rear ; she did not like to be gained upon, and she was panting with something more than exertion when she reached the threshold of our retreat. There was not immediate room for her entrance, and, as she pushed a passage inwards, I caught a flash from her eye.

"Could you not all have kept quietly together?" she exclaimed. "Ellen, you are always so impetuous. You never think of your elders. There is Mr. Horton under the rain still."

"He is coming in," said Fred ; "*if there is room for him.*" And he glanced significantly at aunt, who seemed to require a sort of circle to herself.

However, the rector was admitted within the magic ring, and we younger ones found standing or sitting room as we best could around. There was nothing to cheer us up in such a position but the commencement of the feasting, and we set to it accordingly

It had been intended we should have inspected the roses and paraded the walks first, but even Aunt Rachel admitted the impossibility of keeping to this programme, and turned her attention to the big claret-bowl. For my part, I plied the children with tarts and creams till the space was really becoming limited, and I began to question my severity upon the capabilities of George. It was evident he was not the only child in the world who could consume viands and show silent enjoyment under the process. Still it was a wise disposition of Providence in the present emergency, since imprisonment with Aunt Rachel would have been too trying an ordeal had the party wished to use their tongues in any other way.

I had always believed in the degeneracy of boys, but the little girls surprised me. A sudden ray of sunshine was the first thing to quicken their faculties and send some superfluous crumbs over frocks and floor as they started to their feet. Their brothers were already alert, and were off in a mad frolic down the steps of the summer-house before aunt's voice could check them.

"Ellen, Ellen! call them back!" she cried to me. "We must have things in order. This will never do! The games are to come on next."

I pleaded that the grass was too wet yet for the young ladies to venture on, and got a reprieve of half an hour for the escaped band. Meanwhile I took the girls under my wing and showed them the cascade,

the rockery, and all the points of interest about the adjacent grounds. These being exhausted, and the boys not forthcoming, I determined on allowing them to have races along the gravel walks which were now shining in the sunbeams.

To give greater spirit to the proceedings, I embarked in one of these contests myself, and we were all turning a corner at full speed when we rushed nearly into Mr. Locke's arms.

I did not know that he was an invited guest; and began apologies and explanations.

"You find us in a wild state," I said. "But we have some young friends for the afternoon. The rain kept us in until now, and we have broken loose with a vengeance."

"I find you as I hoped," he exclaimed, "in the midst of enjoyment."

From this I divined that Aunt Rachel had asked him; but in her determination to make the matter unimportant to me had not even mentioned it. I smiled at the moment.

"Are you to help us with 'Little Miss Midge'?" I said.

"What is that?—a new game, Miss Wynham?"

"No, no; a very old one!" and my countenance showed amusement again. "Aunt Rachel is to restore it."

"I am here to make myself useful in any way," he returned. "And there—— I hear your aunt call-



ing to us now. I suppose proceedings begin at once."

Though we obeyed the summons very promptly, I can't say as much for the dutifulness of the boys.

Mr. Locke had to rush hither and thither like a distracted usher; I had to raise my voice till it was hoarser than a raven's; and aunt herself had to stand for some time on the steps of the summer-house, waving her striped Indian shawl, ere the truants appeared.

When they were got hold of at last, they showed tokens of rebellion still, and only that aunt had some prize baskets of delicious fruit, ranged in order for the winners of the games, I doubt that she could have started us at all. She had given up her pet pastime of "The Silent Benches" as unsuited to a mixed multitude and an open-air recreation; but she persisted in others which were scarcely of a more cheerful type.

The "Friar of Orders Grey" was a doleful procession, headed most unfitly by Fred. We were supposed to march solemnly round a given holly-bush, and to stop at a signal from her, and face round the other way. Forfeits was the only rightful enlivenment of the business, for if any one was a second late in turning, a penalty was to be inflicted at once.

Fred, however, could not resist the temptation of bringing more spirit into the proceedings. He wheeled about at unexpected moments, and in wild irregularity,

falling with a vengeance of his own upon more sedate promenaders. In his last turn he brought the whole party to the ground by some electric contrivance passing from one to the other ; and aunt arose then in wrath.

"I can do nothing with that boy !" she cried. "Let him leave us, and you shall have a grand game now. We will begin 'Little Miss Midge.'"

I saw Merylle fly at the name ; but aunt caught her by the back of her hat. This seemed a preliminary to the seizure upon her curls, and she looked still more panic-stricken.

"Where are you running to, miss ?" said Aunt Rachel fiercely. "I want you especially for this. It is your brother who is sent away."

"No, no, aunt," broke in Fred. "I'm going to be good as gold. Let me stay, and I'll help to set them spinning."

It was a circle, indeed, which was to be formed. Aunt made us all take hands, and as the ominous circumference was described, Merylle, who was the only one left out, grew pale again.

"You are to go in the middle, miss," pursued Aunt Rachel authoritatively.

But at this fatal confirmation of Fred's idea, Merylle took flight in earnest.

It was in vain that I called to her, that aunt clutched at her ; she eluded us both, and her funny little figure was only captured after much difficulty by Fred.

At this juncture something stronger than Aunt Rachel's decrees put an end to her alarms. The rain, which had been threatening for the last few minutes, came down with a sudden vengeance anew. The sky looked hopeless, and an adjournment to the house was the only thing to be thought of.

Here I came to the rescue of the disconsolate youngsters in the most propitious manner possible. I provided tea and cakes with immediate despatch, and I believe no better conclusion to the day could have been found.

The carriages came round shortly afterwards, and all drove away, leaving aunt, however, in rather doubtful humour.

"Such weather!" she murmured, casting an angry look at the sky. "It has spoiled everything. And there! I do believe it is going to clear now, just when all is over."

"It cleared more than once," I said. "It might have been far worse. A showery day is not a complete failure. I think they all enjoyed themselves very much."

These words composed her a little, and she went off to see about Flossy, who was still somewhat of an invalid.

"Now, Merylle," exclaimed Fred, with a sly pinch, "you have lost a chance of enlightening the world and doing good service to your country. But for you we should all have gained invaluable knowledge to-day,

even if you had suffered by it. I did not think you were such a little coward."

"It is better than to be a big tease," retorted Merylle. "Whatever aunt intended, I knew you would play some tricks upon me."

This was too probable a proceeding to be disclaimed, and Fred could only give his pet another little pinch.

Meanwhile I felt rather anxious about George. He had looked of a sickly pallor all the afternoon, and scarcely had we reached the house than he had disappeared from the scene, resisting even the constraining aroma of tea and spice-cakes.

"Have any of you seen George?" I asked.

"I did," said Dick. "He said he was hungry when we came in, and I saw him stealing towards the pantry. Eliza had left the door open, and I am sure he's locked up there this moment."

I ran at the words and found that the supposition was correct. George was in imprisonment. But he was making no outcries for release. When I opened the door he was seated on a Cheshire cheese munching a tea-cake. It was too much. I seized him by the arm, dragged him forth, and ordered him instantly to bed.

"I was hungry," he whimpered. "I got nothing all day."

"Nothing!" I ejaculated. "And you had your dinner at one o'clock, and have been feasting in the summer-house ever since."

"I wasn't; *they was*," he answered, "You never minded me."

"You were certainly not the first," I said, with a reproving shake. "But you take good care to cram yourself. You look as ill as possible this moment. No doubt you have been eating up all the remnants."

The shelves indeed looked conspicuously bare, and I thought it only a wise precaution to carry out my mandate as to the early retirement. As this cut him off from supper, there was a continued wail, but I resisted its importunity and remained inflexible.

The next morning George was ill. I felt that the attack was due to over-feeding, and got very angry when the nurse hinted that it was from want of his evening meal. However it might be, he could not eat now. I could scarcely believe in this condition at first. But when I had brought him a cup of tea and a slice of toast myself, and saw him turn away his head rejectingly, even I was convinced, and thought there was something pitiful in the aspect of his abstinence.

He was such a silent child I had no idea I should have missed him in the schoolroom or elsewhere that morning, but somehow I did. The gaze of his solemn brown eyes seemed to follow me hauntingly, and I longed to see his stolid little figure in its brown pinafore seated on the high stool as usual. How strange it is that we scarcely value things till we have lost them! Nothing seems to have its due worth when it is set actually before us. Distance, which

diminishes the apparent proportions of objects, and absence, which is supposed to blot them out, often bring them for the first time clearly before our view. The feeling of this had grown very strong for me of late, as I pictured the dear forms of father and mother. When they were present I had failed to realise all that they were and had ever been to us ; they did not appear half so necessary to my heart's happiness. It was only when tears of regret and yearning had filled my eyes that I saw them in their true aspect as the loving heads of a home and household which had no proper bond of union without them.

George remained unwell for several days, and during that time I was so restlessly anxious for his recovery that I neglected the other children. Dick fell into hopeless disgrace with Aunt Rachel on account of his growing untidiness; and Merylle's piano-forte performance became so wildly aggressive that the smashing of the instrument at one stroke would have been gentleness itself in comparison with her prolonged ferocity.

Lucy's little feet pattered everywhere after me. If I went to schoolroom, store-closet, or George's bedside, she followed inevitably. I thought the proceeding harmless, and calculated to keep her out of mischief: not so Aunt Rachel. She appeared suddenly in the doorway of the library when we were making our rounds, and pounced upon us directly.

"What is that child about?" she cried. "She keeps

trotting up and down incessantly. How can I write my letters, or do anything with such noise and fidget? It is enough to drive one distracted."

"Lucy, go into the school-room," I said, "and look over your picture-books. I will be with you presently."

But she clung to my dress and murmured something about Dick which had touching significance.

If Meryle had been good for anything, she ought to have been able to take her in charge. But the former followed too closely in the steps of her brother Fred to be available for much but giddiness.

It was with a feeling of mingled delight and thankfulness that I saw George at the breakfast-table again. Never before had I plied him so generously with viands, and a smile actually stole into his big brown eyes at the unexpected beneficence.

Aunt Rachel was fonder of him, I think, than of the others, he was so quiet. Thus his appearance gained a welcome from her, too; and everything looked pleasant and prosperous after an interim of uneasiness.

## CHAPTER VII.

### A DAY OF ALARM.

“ Oh ! let my weakness have an end !  
Give unto me, made lowly wise,  
The spirit of self-sacrifice ;  
The confidence of reason give ;  
And in the light of truth thy bondmaid let me live !”  
WORDSWORTH.

NEVER shall I forget the happy morning on which I received a letter from my parents announcing their return. They were already in England, and were to be with us the same evening. At the risk of occasioning a variety of new accidents, I sprang up and embraced the children all round again. They were in blooming order. I could exhibit them with triumph, and my heart felt a mixture of pride and elation. The whole world appeared to bound into sympathy with my joy.

There had been rain in the night, but sunshine was golden once more. Diamonds sparkled on leaf and flower ; the air was buoyant, and seemed to me in



every breath to carry whispers of the coming happiness. I was eager to have the house and place in perfect order for the arrival. The children so far were promising, and I thought I would leave them to play on this occasion, and devote myself with vigour to the duties of housewife and gardener. The store-room wanted tidying up, and the flower-beds in front of the conservatory, which were my special care, demanded a finishing-touch to bring their culture into prominence.

When I grew very busy I was apt to become a little fussy. Having abandoned the young ones to their own resources, I did not want to see anything more of them, and I waved my arms with a warning gesture for retreat whenever they came within sight. This was all very well till the early dinner-bell rang. That was a summons sure to be attended to, and which generally met with an eager and prompt response. It gathered the party now in rather wild condition, but still safe in limb, and sound in health, if I were to judge by the hungry appetites.

After this, one and all scattered again, at least I had thought so, till I met with an unwelcome interruption. I had devoted the morning to out-door operations, and was at present in the store-closet giving directions about the evening repast for the travellers, when I heard a trotting foot at my side. It announced Lucy's advent, and a little pleading voice broke forth simultaneously.

"Ellie! Ellie! Do give me a French plum," she began. "I know where you have them—in that big box over there."

Now it happened that at that moment I had discovered a provoking want in my stores. An important ingredient was lacking for a pudding which both my father and mother were especially fond of. I had determined to show my thoughtfulness by having it prepared for them on this occasion, and I felt greatly vexed when I found the impossibility of so doing.

"You little tease, run away this instant!" I exclaimed to Lucy. "You follow me everywhere! I can do nothing, think of nothing amongst you all. It is no wonder things are forgotten. You never give me a second's peace."

I did not trouble myself about the effect of my words. I had other matters to occupy me, and before my household duties were satisfactorily concluded an hour had passed over. It was then nearly four o'clock. Our parents were expected between six and seven, and I had ordered a late dinner for them.

I heard Aunt Rachel calling to me at this moment, and was obliged to go to her in the library. She had just discovered some dire mischief which Dick had wrought. He was amazingly fond of ink. I suppose the colour had attraction for him as well as the indelible nature of its dye. However he was guarded, he infallibly contrived to dabble in it in somewise,

and an awful trace of his dark propensities had been left now.

The writing-table was a mass of blots on its polished surface, and wild arithmetical figures danced a sort of hobgoblin frolic on the back of the portfolio.

Dick was apt to be seized with a calculating mania at unpropitious moments, and no thought of care or cleanliness deterred him from working out his inspirations forthwith.

It was at this luckless table that Aunt Rachel penned her effusions to her maiden friends. Some sheets of her best crested paper had suffered in the general destruction, and she was crimson with anger.

"You are the most terrible set of children," she declaimed passionately. "If you were good for anything, Ellen, you could have checked them in a measure. But they grow worse every day. What a blessing this state of things is coming to an end at last! No one could have borne it much longer."

I felt my pulses start off at a gallop, like her own. Was this really true? Was my boasted rule such an utter failure, a mere vision of conceit, which was powerless for good in the actual sphere of duty? It might be so, yet I could not fully believe it. Aunt Rachel was a hard judge. I would not accept her condemnation.

"It would be impossible to please you, aunt," I exclaimed warmly. "I have done my very best, and I am sure my mother will say so. Accidents hap-

pened when she was at home, too. Dick has been always the same."

"Do you know where he is now?" was her rejoinder.

"No," I said quickly, uneasiness stealing over me at the query.

"He is in the harness-room," broke out my aunt in a terrible voice; "blacker than anything I ever saw in my life. He has been forbidden that place thousands of times; but there he was when I was coming round from the garden, with a brush in his hand, and daubed from head to foot. His mother won't know him."

"Why did you not bring him in?" I demanded. "I have been as busy as can be. Surely, aunt, you might have done that much."

"Bring him in!" she almost screamed. "Do you think I would let him within fifty yards of me? No, no, miss; you may manage that capture yourself, if you please."

Of course I had to rush forth then, and when I found Dick, I saw that my aunt's descriptive powers had not been too vividly exercised. He was in an appalling state—his garments hopelessly besmeared, and his skin shining like a negro's from the alternate application of brush and blacking. I caught him by the sleeve, the farthest extremity possible, but even that was perilous contact, and I was almost relieved when he released himself.

"Oh, Ellie!" he exclaimed; "ain't I just hard at work! I'm helping Thomas with the harness for this evening. Father likes it bright, and it's as good as a mirror this minute. You can see your very face in it."

"I wish you could see your own face," I interposed wrathfully, "and perhaps you would think less of your work. I don't know how you are to appear before your father and mother. Do you imagine they would rather have the harness in order than yourself? It's absurd of *you* to talk of polishing and cleaning up. It's a good bath you should be in from morning till night. It would be the only fit place for you."

Thereupon I marched him before me to the house, keeping a safe distance between us, but watching narrowly all the time that he did not escape.

"Where are the others?" I questioned as we gained the portico.

"I don't know," said Dick. "In the quarry, I dare say. Fred wanted us to play 'Pilgrim's Progress,' and go through the 'Valley of Humiliation.'"

There were rather hazardous paths overhanging the aforesaid quarry, and I started at the mention of it. Fred was foolhardy himself, and if he took it into his head to carry out the analogy between Christian and his journeying, he would of course make the way as trying and difficult as possible for his followers.

Happily all uneasiness was removed at the moment by the sound of a chorus of voices. Fred's headed it,

and as his tones were full and ringing as usual, it was to be presumed no accident had happened.

Meanwhile time was passing, and calling to the children to come in at once, and get themselves trimmed and tidied, I ran up myself to my mother's dressing-room. A few finishing-touches were wanting here. The snowy muslin curtains had still to be looped up with their blue ribbons, and some fragrant flowers were to be arranged the last thing in the glasses on the toilet-table.

The work was just completed when I heard the nurse's voice calling to me. It was rather anxious in its tones ; and anticipating some further disfigurement to Dick, I hastened to respond.

"What is the matter, nurse?" I said, running out on the lobby.

"Nothing, miss, I hope," was the reply. "But I am looking for Miss Lucy. Have you got her?"

"I!" broke from my lips. "No, no. . . . Did she not come in with the others? I have not seen her for hours."

"She wasn't with them at all," returned the woman. "Not one has laid eyes on 'er since dinner."

I grew pale at the words.

In a panic of fright I sprang down the stairs, along the passages, and rushed from one to the other of the household asking breathlessly if they could tell anything about the child. But the same blank account met me everywhere.

It appeared that the cook and myself were the last persons who had seen her as she peered into the store-room, coaxing in her pretty childish way for some sweetmeat. I remembered that she had on her round gipsy hat then, and I had felt certain when I dismissed her that she was about to join the elder children, and have a play with them in the grounds.

Aunt Rachel was still at the writing-table in the library, and I turned to her as a last resource. But when I broke in on her here with questionings and eagerness, she looked quite angry.

"Don't get into such a puff, Ellen," she exclaimed; "that won't do any good. Of course the child will turn up. There was never one of them that didn't. Ring the bell for tea, and see if she doesn't come tearing along in a trice."

The suggestion, though so sharply put, was not one to be disregarded. Fred appreciated it, at all events, and seizing on the great hall-bell he went forth with a will, swinging it vigorously on all sides, till the whole of the outdoor work-people gathered in surprise.

They were, of course, interrogated in turn, but with the same results; an utter dearth of intelligence was reported everywhere.

Meanwhile I was darting wildly through the house, searching each nook and corner, and calling imploringly on our little Lucy.

She was a shy, sensitive child, and I thought it possible that, repulsed by me, she might have crept

away to fret in secret. But not a trace of her could be discovered, and I was becoming momentarily more agonised with alarm. No thought of pride and successfulness in my management or preparations intruded now. I could have swept away every doing and merit of my own in the intense longing to recall one act of hastiness. How gladly would I have stood before my mother, bereft of all credit and commendation, if I could only have had her children ready to greet her, unbroken in number, unchanged in health and happiness! Bitterly I reproached myself for driving Lucy away, knowing, as I did, her innate timidity, and her tendency to accept any repulse as a sort of absolute rejection. But still, where was she? However I might have wounded her, what had happened, whither had she stolen to? She never went far from the house by herself, and every spot within reach or view had been thoroughly searched.

Putting ceaseless suppositions to myself, I went restlessly again and again over the same ground. I had quitted the house, and was running hither and thither outside, when I paused at last at the extremity of the garden. This plot of ground had been laid out in old-fashioned style, beginning with a parterre of flowers and shrubs, and ending with vegetables and fruit-trees. Beyond was an apple orchard, and the boundary division between it and the upper garden was a long, narrow sheet of water.



I stood and gazed, and a cold fear struck to my heart at the moment. There were water-lilies on the pond, their dark circling leaves spread around the margin, and the beautiful white blossoms floated lightly, like some fairy barks, on the shining surface.

I recalled with a thrill that Lucy had pleaded for some of these flowers but the day before, and I had refused her, not liking to pluck them, and spoil the lovely picture before our parents' return.

A footstep behind me made me start almost with a shudder. Fred was there ; but he was really anxious now, and I clung to him piteously.

"Oh, Fred . . . Fred ! why did you come here ?" I murmured. "You don't think anything can have happened ?"

"No, no, Nell," he exclaimed cheerfully. "She'll be found ; I haven't a doubt of it. Lucy is an odd child. She has crept away somewhere, but you'll see she'll be got."

My frightened glance was still turned on the water. Fred's eyes followed it, and putting his hand in mine, he drew me away from the vicinity, making me retrace my steps along the walk.

"You mustn't think of such a thing," he said. "Lucy would never come so far alone. I still believe, Nell, she is somewhere in hiding in the house."

The words sent me flying thither once more, but scarcely had I gained the porch than I stopped, and the icy qualm came suddenly back upon me. Turn-

ing, I had seen that Fred was beckoning to one of the men. He had got rid of me, but not of his own fears, and he went off hastily again, followed by the man, in the direction of the garden.

At the moment a grating noise reached my ears. I knew the sound too well, and what it announced. The carriage was rolling round from the yard upon the gravel drive. Thomas, mindful and punctual as ever, was starting for the train to meet his master and mistress. They were coming back, they would be here in less than an hour. The joy so long anticipated, so ardently implored, drew nigh at last, and I, who had sprung towards it so often in irresistible yearning, started back from it now. I could not face it; it had turned to terror in my eyes. How could I meet father and mother, who had trusted me, when one was missing from the circle? What greeting could be heard or heeded with the words wrung from a mother's heart echoing in my ears—"Ellen, Ellen! Take care of my little Lucy!"

I stood for some minutes on the door-step motionless—paralysed. I felt the necessity for action pressing stronger than ever upon me, but the power to respond was gone. I could only watch with bewildered gaze the carriage moving rapidly along the avenue, passing beneath the arched gateway at the lodge, and disappearing finally on the road beyond.

The sun was sinking in the heavens with a rosy smile. No cloud overcast its countenance, or fore-

shadowed trouble in the face of Nature. Everywhere was the memory of warmth and beauty, present glory, and happy hopeful promise for the coming day. Flowers had that peculiar rich scent which is drawn from a glowing heart. The very breath of evening that closed their petals might have been a caress, so softly was its touch laid on them. The pleasant cawing of the rooks as they flew to their nests in the elm avenue beyond had the music of home and happiness in its tone. Nothing was wrong or wanting in the fair world around, yet each sound, each vision struck on me with a pang. I could bear it no longer, I could gaze no more on a scene of peacefulness, and with a start, as if I had been driven forth by a resistless hand, I sprang down the steps, and sped once again in the direction of the garden-walk.

I had not gone far when I was brought to a pause. A voice was calling to me, and in a sudden hope of some tidings I turned instinctively. But it was only Mr. Locke I saw, and I felt that the presence of any stranger was intolerable now. Yet something in his expression arrested me. I divined that he knew of our distress, and I flew to him the next instant with irrepressible eagerness. I caught his hand in the excess of my longing.

"Oh, Mr. Locke!" I exclaimed, "have you heard anything? Has Lucy been found?"

His eyes were full of kindness, even emotion.

"Not yet," he murmured; "but she will be. I

have no fear about it. Dear Miss Wynham, do not yield to this uneasiness. I came to tell you that I am going to help in the search, that everything will be done, if you will only remain in the house, if you will but wait quietly there."

"But they are coming back!" I cried. "My father, my mother! They will be here immediately. Oh, Mr. Locke, how can I wait?"

"Before their return all may be well," he urged. "You may have the little one safe with you again. Let me beg of you to do this. It is the wish of every one, not mine alone." And he would have drawn me gently in the direction of the house.

But I resisted pressure and persuasion. I stopped, turned round on the walk, and my eyes grew distended with the anguished fear which was too living to be driven back.

"But the water!" I murmured. "Fred is there. I must see. I must know all!"

"There is nothing to know," interposed Mr. Locke quickly. "I met your brother just now. She has not been at the pond."

"Thank God!" I cried, and I clasped my hands together in the impulse of more than relief.

I was less unyielding at once, and, reassured by the promises of Mr. Locke that he would have the search prosecuted more vigorously than ever, I acceded to his wish and re-entered the house.

It had been the middle of June when my parents

left us. Now it was the month of August. It was drawing towards its close, and the evenings, though lovely, soon gained an imperceptible chill. I watched and waited patiently for more than half an hour. Then a sudden tremor ran through me. I had caught a distant noise. It was the low rumbling of wheels.

The nurse had the three children with her upstairs; Aunt Rachel had gone to her own room, and I was standing alone in the hall when the sound reached me. Oh, how strange life looked to me then! What darkening hand had been outstretched to change and cloud it as in a moment! Here was the joy I had pictured, longed for—the return of my beloved parents—and I shrank from it, I shuddered at it!

I fell on my knees where I was, and, with the intensity which only a heart-prayer knows, I implored succour from One who is stronger than sorrow, from Him who is “a very present help in time of trouble.” “Surely He must hear me,” I said to myself, as the piteous cry broke forth. “He is too good, too loving, to turn away from His poor, pleading child.” And then with a sudden gush of tears a measure of relief came, and with it the first rising of a hope.

But the sound drew nearer—the dreaded instant approached. I rose and rushed into the portico. My overwrought brain had not deceived me. The carriage had passed the last turn in the avenue; it was coming swiftly to the door. I felt that I had grown

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pale as death, but I stood motionless awaiting the inevitable blow.

At that moment the blood rushed back to my face, every nerve in my body bounded into life. I had heard a voice—a call—from the shrubbery-walk. What it meant I could not fully tell, but there was excitement in the tones. I darted down the steps and ran breathlessly forward.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### COMING EVENTS.

“Hail to that house ! all good befall  
Where Jesus Christ is Lord of all.  
Ah, if His presence were not there,  
How empty and how lone it were !”

GERMAN HYMN.

THE voice had been Mr. Locke's. It was he who called me. I saw him hastening along the walk—and yet I scarcely saw him. With a rapture for which I have no words, I perceived that he bore Lucy in his arms. Her cheeks were dimpled, glowing as ever, and she had a big coloured picture-book in her hand. No harm had happened to her ; her nimble little feet were ready and active, and at the first sight of the carriage, she sprang from the detaining clasp. As the horses were reined up she was there at the instant. She was the first after all to greet her mother ! That her curls were tossed, her dress crushed, and her pretty face a little flushed and wild-looking mattered nothing to me then. She was there—she was safe,

and the dreadful agony of the past moments was blotted out like a dream.

The travellers were already out of the carriage when I approached, and Lucy was in her father's arms. The other children had rushed down from the nursery, and all crowded together on the steps. Fred was the only one wanting, but as I looked around for him anxiously, I saw him springing across the lawn.

"My darlings! My Diamonds!" murmured my mother as she held one after another to her heart. "Thank God that I have you all safe again!"

Tears which have once flowed are always near to the surface, and I could scarcely restrain mine now. I was filled with an emotion and thankfulness which none could know of. I thought of the love which encircled all, which had sent a smile of peace upon our home, instead of the shadow of desolation. If my lips uttered nothing, my heart was not silent; and the words of the touching German hymn rushed to mind :

"Joy is stronger than sorrow,  
Life stronger than death,  
Light stronger than darkness  
So, all that have breath  
Praise the Lord !"

Meanwhile Mr. Locke had stolen away. He had not wished to intrude at a moment like this. But as I saw him disappearing on the avenue, I ran im-



pulsively after him. I could not let him leave without a word. Once more I seized his hands with irrepressible fervour.

"Where did you find her?" I exclaimed. "How am I to thank you?"

"She was in the barn," he returned quickly; "locked up in the barn. She had crept in there to look at her picture-book, and fell asleep amongst the sheaves. The door, which is generally kept fastened, had only been left open for a minute or two. Thus no one thought of searching for her in a shut-up house, barred on the outside. When she awakened, and began to cry out, she was soon found."

He gave the explanation hurriedly, not to detain me, and was gone the next instant.

I might have thought that nothing but happiness and gratitude could have filled my heart on this night. But our best thoughts seem the most fleeting. We are drawn ever and again from upraised emotions to the lower atmosphere of earth. The jealousy I have already spoken of haunted me for a while. I fancied my mother surrounded herself with the other children with a gladness which shut out me. I have well used the word *fancied*, for in this lay all the self-inflicted pain. She could not but respond to the childish caresses of the little ones, but when I was taking leave of her for the night I was drawn tightly to her arms, and I felt tears of affection upon my cheeks. I had told her myself of the agitation of that

day, and she could guess that I had gone through much.

"Ellie, Ellie! my own dear little girl!" she murmured. "Are you glad to have your mother back with you again?"

I could only respond with a clasp, for my heart was full. Once more the joy of trust and lovingness had stolen over it, and when I was laid to rest in my little white-curtained bed, I slept with a sweetness and soundness which carried me back to my very earliest years. It was broad daylight when I awoke, and for an instant I could scarcely recollect what was the sense of delight which had overshadowed me even in my dreams. The moment it came to mind I sprang up joyously, and hastened, when I was ready, to my mother's dressing-room. A sort of pressure seemed removed from me, and freedom had come back again.

I had tasted the pleasure of authority, and found that it tied me down to an unwonted bondage. Instead of making me my own mistress, it had made me the handmaid of others, and I realised that the relation of child to parents is a very sweet state of subjection. The former has only to give trust. With the latter rests all the thought, trouble, and anxiety which bring happiness to bear upon the younger lives.

My morning greetings to father and mother partook of an eager warmth on this occasion, and the little ones capered about in wild elation. It made me un-

easy for their later aspect at the breakfast-table, and I was hoping they would have put in an improved appearance.

"Dick, do be quiet!" I exclaimed, as he jumped madly down the stairs, clearing Eliza and the coal-scuttle at the bottom. "You will be certain to make a figure of yourself before you stop."

"Mother doesn't mind," he said. "She'll like me anyhow."

And with this reckless statement he managed to trip up the housemaid more successfully, and scatter some of the coals by the collision.

That he was obligingly active in picking them up had nothing meritorious in my eyes. His help was given only too gladly in a case where a black mark might be acquired in the process. I soiled a fresh handkerchief in trying to bring him white again, and met no further reward for my efforts than a series of impatient gestures all the while.

"That'll do, Ellie! that'll do!" he murmured; "you are such a fidget about things! I've got to go out and feed the pups yet."

This announcement was enough. It was wasted work, of a truth, to pay any regard to his appearance now, when a visit to the yard was in immediate prospect.

In honour of our parents' return, all the children were allowed into the dining-room on this morning, and the nursery repast was still dispensed with.

Aunt Rachel came down with an important air, and exhibited the array as some jewels of her own brightening.

"There they are, Eleanor!" she exclaimed to my mother. "Every one safe and sound; and hard work it was to guard them!"

"George looks a little pale, I think," said my mother anxiously.

It was strange how she loved that child. His speechless placidity, his steady appetite, his mental dulness—nothing had power to arrest the flow of tenderness in her heart.

"He was ill for a few days," returned Aunt Rachel, "and Ellen kept him somewhat low. She said it would be better for him."

I darted a reproachful look on the speaker. There was an unkind insinuation here which I did not think I deserved.

"George has had plenty to eat," I broke in warmly. "Rather too much, I should say. Ask Fred, or Merylle, or any of them."

"There was no occasion to give him 'too much,'" said my mother gently.

"I did not give it—he took it," I returned.

"Well, he is delicate; we must remember that," was the reply, and at the words I felt almost angry.

This was such an absurd fancy of my mother's; it was too provoking. If I did not eat my breakfast, or was less hungry than usual, she never noticed such

tokens of fragility. But once George or his appetite failed, she was all concern. Sometimes I thought Lucy was the pet, and perhaps she gained more demonstrations of affection from her winning, coaxing ways; but no one claimed more of my mother's thoughtfulness than George.

Dick, in his attention to the pups, had disregarded himself, and Aunt Rachel was the first to spy a rent in his knickerbockers.

"Did nurse send you down that way?" she demanded. "I'm positive she did not. Where have you been since she dressed you?"

"I caught somewhere on a hasp," returned Dick buoyantly. "But I'm all right—it didn't hurt."

"Do you hear that, Richard?" exclaimed aunt, appealing to my father now. "That boy is incorrigible! You don't know the task I have had with him. His clothes are in tatters, and his skin like a sweep's while you turn round, and as long as he's not killed outright he thinks he is keeping clear of mischief."

"Come here, Dick, my boy," said my father, attempting a frown. "This is a dark account I get of you. You must be popped down in my 'black books' forthwith."

"That's where he would like to be," I interposed laughingly. "You couldn't give him a pleasanter berth. The very colour would work a charm."

"He has a passion for ink, at all events," declaimed Aunt Rachel indignantly. "I ask you just to look at

the carpet and writing-table in the library, and you will admit that, to your cost. But you all spoil him, so it is no wonder he ruins things in return. You are laughing at him this minute, Richard !” And aunt’s face flushed up to her cap-ribbons.

“ I am going to be terribly strict,” said my father, sobering down. “ This is the last morning, nay, moment, of indulgence. We begin lessons after breakfast. How have you got on with your arithmetic, Dick ?”

The question set me trembling, for, unable to cope with him on this ground, I had abandoned it with a show of tactics, and entrenched myself in the safer quarters of history and geography.

“ You are very ignorant, Dick,” I had said to him. “ I had no idea you knew so little of English. You must begin at the very rudiments, I see.”

But Dick was sharp in observation, if not in the memory of dates and the measurement of the earth. To my horror he broke out now in a loud voice :

“ Ellie took my slate from me, father ; and it was no good indeed working at it for her. She has no more idea of fractions than George ; she doesn’t even know long division !”

At this awful account my father showed symptoms of risibility again, and only his awe of Aunt Rachel restrained him.

“ Everything seems to be a joke,” exclaimed that lady angrily. “ If you had been tied to this house for

the last two months you wouldn't find it so, I can tell you."

My mother, who generally came to the rescue in a discussion, thought it well to put in a gentle word or two now.

"You have been very good, Rachel," she said, "and both Richard and I feel really grateful to you. We could not have gone so far away, with an easy mind, had you not undertaken this charge for us."

Aunt's plumage was smooth again. A few conciliatory words go a long way with some people. To me, however, nothing approving had been said, and I felt slightly aggrieved. George's pallor, Dick's candour—all had conspired to pull me down and displace the last remnants of my propped-up pride. However, the sight of Lucy's soft, smiling face quickly dissipated any rising vexation. The feeling could not but be exchanged for one of thankfulness that the little darling was safe, and that I had been spared the pang of a lifelong compunction.

After breakfast my mother called me into the library to look over some accounts with her, and in fact to go through the preliminary forms before yielding up my keys of office. These matters concluded with tolerable satisfaction, I thought I had earned a right to the confidence which had been so long withheld from me.

"Now, mother, you will tell me why you left us?" I exclaimed earnestly. "I have been so wishing to

know, and I suppose the cause is not a secret any longer."

"Why should you suppose that, Ellie?"

I hesitated.

"Well, I fancied once the business was all over, you would not hide it from me. I am not exactly a child now," I pursued; "I can hear of things without speaking of them."

"That is well," returned my mother. "But curiosity is always a mistake, Ellie. Anything I could tell you would give you little pleasure. You would neither be the better nor the happier for hearing it. In fact, I feel that it is right still to avoid the subject. Your father does not wish it spoken of."

I was more than disappointed; something of displeasure came into my countenance.

"If it were one of the other children," I began. "But I—the eldest——"

"Am I denying you a gratification—an enjoyment?" interposed my mother. "You speak as if it were so, but I have told you the simple fact. You cannot judge of the matter—I can."

"It is always a gratification to have a request granted," sprang to my lips, but I repressed the unbecoming utterance. I was silent instead.

"My dear child," continued my mother earnestly, "you have only to believe me, and then you can find nothing vexatious in my reticence. I have not given you cause, I think, to doubt me hitherto."



She drew me to her in saying this, and half-ashamed of my dissatisfied air I made an effort to master it. I raised my eyes to hers.

"You will tell me one thing at least," I exclaimed. "My father was not ill—that was not the cause?"

"No, no, Ellie dear," she hastened to answer. "What made you fancy that?"

"Aunt Rachel said something about it," I explained. "But, indeed, I thought it was a mistake. Your absence would have been too hard to bear had I believed this."

She still had my hand in hers.

"To make your mind easy, I must give you one assurance," she said. "This matter does not immediately concern your father or myself. It has relation to your uncle George."

I uttered an ejaculation.

"And did you go so far away for his sake?" I asked. "Did you leave us all for that?"

"Don't look so indignant, Ellie," said my mother smilingly, as she viewed the excitement in my face. "The separation is over now; you must forgive your poor uncle, if he caused it. Besides, I believe I have not been quite correct in my statement. One important item in the business was especially my own."

"And did you succeed in this?" I questioned. "Did you accomplish what you wished?"

"Yes, Ellie;" and my mother sighed.

This seemed a contradiction, and I was quick to notice it.

"If you succeeded, you should be well-pleased," I said. "Are you not so, or was there nothing really to be gained?"

"A great deal," she returned quietly. "Something of undeniable value."

"Then why did you sigh, mother?"

She looked at me, and there was a suffusion as of gathering tears in her gaze.

"I have passed through much that is painful since I left you," was the reply. "What I have longed for for years came to me when the worth was gone. Do you not know, my child, that we may get all that the world can give us, and pay for it with a pang; that we never grasp an earthly good but with a feeling of strange disappointment? But there—I must not speak to you in a saddening way. You are too young yet, perhaps, to feel this. And my words will not bring the knowledge. We none of us believe another till we have tested vanity for ourselves and found how miserably it is wanting."

Just then my father entered, and the conversation was interrupted. He came to ask me for Dick's slate which I had been cruel enough to lock up. The sound of his pencil travelling along it in terrible, triumphant curves had been too much for my endurance. I had deemed it better to condemn him to inaction than myself to torture, and I had seized it

accordingly. When I yielded it up now, Dick thought fit to wave it in my face.

"There, Ellie!" he exclaimed; "are you afraid of it still? The worse the noise, the better the work; but that didn't do you, you know."

"And rudeness does not do for you, my lad," interposed my father. "I see your knowledge is but small yet, since you are not aware of your ignorance. Your sister here could teach you a good many things—humility, I hope, amongst the number."

I was not so sure of that. It was not exactly my strong point; and I am afraid I would rather have had proficiency or efficiency accredited to me. Humility is too divine in its origin to approve itself to our poorer nature. Pride, strange to say, seems linked close and fast with lowliness; lowliness with nobility.

My father had the boys with him in the library, and my mother took Merylle presently into the schoolroom to hear her play over her latest "piece." This acquirement was due to my instruction; but I rather trembled for it when I heard the erratic measure in which she started. Whether she were nervous or giddy, the effect was much the same. A rush, a crash, stumbling, stoppage—such constituted the leading features of the performance, and I felt that my condemnation was proclaimed in every ring of the keys.

My mother listened quietly to the conclusion.

Then she laid her hands gently on the red, reekless ones which had run such a delirious race.

"Merylle, you have not improved," she said. "This is all wildness and confusion. I am afraid you have not been practising carefully."

"It's too difficult," pouted Merylle, with a crushing glance at me. "No one could play 'The Witches' Frolic.' Ellie would put me to it."

I broke in with explanations, which merged so naturally into accusations, that my mother had to arrest both.

"Never mind," she said, "I am sure you did your best, Ellen. If Merylle found the piece difficult, I can well believe the task of teaching it was still more so."

Though both father and mother had smoothed down matters as considerately as they could for me, my own sense of triumph was gone, and I could almost have shed tears of vexation.

The entrance of Aunt Rachel fortunately arrested this selfish weakness. In her presence I would not own myself conquered, and, turning to the piano, I rearranged the ruffled pages of "The Witches' Frolic" with an assured air.

"Merylle, you were nervous," I said; "you must have been. You will play it steadier again."

"I hope she will never play it again," was Aunt Rachel's comment. "You don't know, Eleanor, what I have suffered with that piece!"

She announced then her intention of leaving on the following day ; and though my mother was courteous and hospitable, aunt's resolve remained unshaken.

"You are very good to wish me to have a little quiet and ease now," she said to my mother. "But till my nerves recover in a measure, I couldn't appreciate either. Some other time, when the boys are older, and Merylle has done her practising, I shall be glad to come to you."

Later on that day a mounted groom brought a note for my mother, which she just glanced at and handed on to my father. It contained an invitation to a dinner-party at the house of one of our leading county families, and my mother wished at first to refuse. My father, however, exchanged a few words with her in a low voice, and she consented then with a sigh.

She looked to me paler and more anxious since her return, and when I heard her settling for an early visit to Uncle George, I conjectured that something was weighing on her mind.

Aunt Rachel came down the next morning in her bonnet. She had fixed to take her departure by the ten o'clock train, and the carriage was ordered round immediately after breakfast.

The boys had not been told of the touching farewell which was in store for them, and Dick eyed her in amaze.

"What has Aunt Rachel her bonnet on for?" he

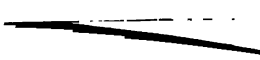
demanded. "She has nothing to do *now*. Her cap would stay steady enough."

I must say I scarcely wondered at the heroic composure with which she bore the impending separation. The boys *were* terrible to deal with. Dick's sharpness, George's dulness, were both equally trying. Aunt took a solemn farewell of me.

"Good-bye, Ellen," she said. "You did your best, perhaps. But there was too much left upon me. I doubt if I shall ever recover it!"

As she looked rather stouter and more rubicund than usual in tendering the statement, it carried considerable weight with it. But it was of a very obvious kind—too palpable to be premonitory. *I* really had grown thin, and might have talked more reasonably of injury to the system. Much as I had always objected to Merylle's circular chubbiness, I quite envied it now. There was a balance about it which must have kept her confident. I felt that I might be afloat any moment like "The Light Princess" if I gave too great an escape to buoyancy.

My father accompanied Aunt Rachel to the train, and when they had left my mother went up to her own room. Having some message to give, I followed her presently, and found her seated before the dressing-table in the act of opening an exquisitely carved casket in ebony. Seeing me, she put it aside hastily, and though my curiosity was roused, I did not venture to ask any question. My mother's confidence was



always given unsought, and it was rather a vain attempt to try to elicit it. Whenever there was anything which it was well for me to know I was taken at once into consultation ; but should the matter be one for reserve, my inquisitiveness was checked by a decisiveness which it would have been vain to combat.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE DIAMONDS.

“ Think naught a trifle, though it small appear ;  
Small sands the mountain, moments make the year,  
And trifles life.”

YOUNG.

THE delights of turmoil and teaching were not over for me yet. The next day my father and mother set out together on a visit to Uncle George, and replaced me in my position of trust. There was neither novelty, excitement, nor expectation connected with it now, and it was duty only which led me to acquiesce in the arrangement.

Fred still went to Mr. Locke in the mornings, and was to continue under his tuition for some time longer, so I was relieved of his presence at an early hour. My mother sent an invitation by him to the curate, asking him to lunch with us the same day at two o'clock. She and my father expected to be home then, and there was no reason to doubt their punctual return, if the demands of nature continued in force.



Unless some astounding revolution had taken place in the mind or *ménage* of uncle, they would not be likely to get much in the way of refreshment at the Manor-House.

The morning passed over in tolerable quietude, and punctually as the clock struck two Fred came bursting into the house, followed at a more correct pace by Mr. Locke.

I had not seen the latter gentleman since the evening of my parents' return and Lucy's recovery, and I met him with considerable warmth. His kindness then could not easily be forgotten, and I felt that it was possibly to his promptitude and energy that I owed my relief from anxiety at such a critical moment of suspense. I liked Mr. Locke, despite of Aunt Rachel's warning apostrophe; and as I saw nothing either wrong or hazardous in the state of feeling, I was not solicitous to check it.

"You still find me mistress in a measure," I exclaimed now, bringing him into the drawing-room. "The heads of the household are out driving, and have not returned. But we expect them back every minute. You know my father, I think, Mr. Locke; but I don't believe you have met my mother yet?"

"No, I have not had that pleasure," he said, and added that he was very anxious to make her acquaintance, from a letter he had received from her.

"About Fred?" I asked.

"Yes," he acquiesced. "It was one which only a

mother could write, and that one a true and tender mother. You must be happy indeed to have her home with you again."

A certain glistening of my eyes told this, I think, without a word, and the remark was more affirmatory than questioning.

Fred had left us to look after some outdoor pets, but Lucy had crept close on my footsteps, and stole up to me now to put her hand in mine.

"Lucy, my child, go over to Mr. Locke," I said. "I don't think you ever thanked him properly for taking you out of the big barn."

"Fred would have found me," rejoined the little puss, with scant courtesy. "He was just coming to me. He said he was."

"So much for the gratitude of the world!" laughed Mr. Locke. "Till a thing is gained and granted, we cry out and beseech. But it is the good we want—not the giver of it. You made a very touching appeal to me through the door that evening, Miss Lucy, and gave me an uncommonly tight clasp of your arms when I first caught you up."

"Yes, I am sure of that," I exclaimed, with a pinch of her pink cheek. "And you are a heartless little creature to forget so soon. Fred would not have had you in time to meet mamma—and what would you have done then?"

At this moment Dick burst into the room.

"There's not a sign of the carriage!" he cried,

"and we are all wild with hunger. George is sitting on the door-step with a green apple."

"He mustn't have that," I exclaimed. "They say he doesn't look well, and is it any wonder if he feeds like this?"

Thereupon I rushed out, and found him pallid and placid as ever, planted as Dick had stated, and with the sickly fruit grasped between both hands. There was an impress of his teeth in it already, in an ominous circlet, and I jerked it away from him indignantly.

"George, you are hopeless," I said. "Where did you get that horrid thing, and how dare you be eating it in secret?"

"Come, you must let him off on one count, Miss Wynham. There is nothing very hidden about the process," interposed Mr. Locke, with a smile.

He had followed me under the compulsory leading of Lucy, who had at last given him her hand in expression of thanks, and had drawn him towards the hall. At the mention of the apple she was curious as Eve.

"Well, yes, he is certainly on an open platform, Mr. Locke," I admitted. "But he was out of *my* sight. His mother is too indulgent—he knows that."

Just then the sound of wheels was heard, and the carriage came speedily into sight. George, of course, was in tears when the party alighted from it; and I was so angry with him for putting in such an appearance that I could have shaken him well.

Luncheon over, my father took Mr. Locke out for a walk, and I did not see him again. My mother had been rather silent during the repast, but I knew from the smile with which she greeted the curate and addressed him afterwards, that her reserve was due only to preoccupation of the thoughts, and that she was attracted already by the frank kindness of his countenance. I asked her about the visit to Uncle George, but she told me little. She said he did not look well, and she seemed uneasy respecting him. Whatever he had been to her, I knew that my mother was tenderly attached to this, her only brother. Indeed she had admitted so much in her partial explanation of the cause of her voyage to New York. It had been no light thing to leave her home and children for so long, and nothing but a very compelling motive could have led to the step.

A few days passed over, and the night arrived for the dinner-party to which my father and mother were invited. The latter went up to dress early, as they had to drive some considerable distance to the house where it was given. When she had been about half-an-hour in her room, I knocked at the door as usual, claiming admission to see her in her evening dress. From the time I was a little child I had always enjoyed this sight.

My mother had a beautiful velvet gown, which was my especial pride and admiration. I was never tired of gazing at her when she was arrayed in this. Her

sweet hazel eyes, glittering hair, and fair skin showed to the greatest advantage when the rich folds of the velvet hung about her, while the dark hue of her bodice was only relieved at the neck and arms by some exquisite old lace.

She wore but few ornaments, and I sometimes wondered at this, for my mother was an earl's grandchild, the only daughter of his only daughter, Lady Eleanor, who married a Mr. Merlin, contrary to her father's wish. I had heard it said that her chief fortune was in her jewels, which came to her as an heirloom, and could not be held back.

My first nurse was a very old woman, who had belonged to the earl's household ; and many a story she told me in the winter evenings, over the fire, of the beauty of my maternal grandmother, and the love-match she made, despite of the many higher wooers who sued for her hand.

In response to my tap at the door, my mother now said, " Come in," and I entered at once. I paused on the threshold, gazed earnestly forwards, then uttered a cry of delight. My mother's dressing-room was hung with blue ; the walls, curtains, the muslin of the toilet-table—all were of the same azure hue, and, framed in by the becoming drapery, she stood now a dazzling, almost regal, figure before me.

She had on her velvet dress, but this had been too often admired to elicit the present start of astonishment. There was a new and unexpected brilliancy

in her aspect. Her bright golden hair was enwreathed with diamonds, on her neck there was a glittering circlet of the same priceless gems, and she wore round each arm a bracelet of different workmanship, but studded likewise with brilliants so large and pure that they reflected rainbow-like colours with every motion of her form.

An instant's hesitation, and I darted towards her excitedly.

"Where did you get them?" I cried. "Mother, mother! Why did you never wear them before?"

She smiled.

"Do they look too gorgeous, Ellie?" she asked. "They were my mother's diamonds. But what she, as Lady Eleanor, might fittingly display, may be out of place on me."

"Out of place!" I cried. "You never looked so well before. You are just as you ought to be—lovely, queenlike!" And I kissed her with a sudden delight.

There was a brightness in her eyes which was almost of pleasure then.

"I knew you would admire them, Ellie, at all events," she said. "I have not been disappointed there."

"But surely they must satisfy you in every way?" I exclaimed. "How could it be otherwise? I never saw anything so grand. The only wonder is how you could have kept them hidden away so

long. They must have come to you ages ago. My grandmother is dead a great many years—is she not ?”

“Yes, just before you were born. You remember your old nurse, Essie? She had been her own maid, and was with her in her last illness. She came to me then, and I think you were four years old before we parted with her, and placed her in the little cottage at Ivywood.”

“I remember Essie well,” I said. “And she told me about some grand jewels which were in the family. I often wondered what you had done with them.”

“Well, you see their magnificence at last, Ellie,” returned my mother. “And as they will come to you, I hope, you must learn to estimate their value aright.”

“They are very precious, then ?” I inquired.

“Well, yes, they have a worth which I cannot fully explain to you now,” was the reply. “If I tell you that they were lost for years, and that I have only just recovered them, you will understand as much as I have time to say with the carriage waiting ;” and with another little smile and a parting kiss of good-bye, she hastened to respond to a call from my father.

When they had driven off, I began to ponder on the little that had been told me, and by a very natural process of reasoning I arrived at the conclu-

sion that the visit to America had some connection with the diamonds, and that whatever had become of them during an interim of years they were now, for the first time, in my mother's possession.

The ebony casket I had seen with her the preceding day was lying open on the dressing-table, and I gazed at it curiously. It was lined with rose-coloured velvet, and I could discover the soft cushioned recess in which each of the glittering ornaments had rested. I suppose the love of what is radiant is naturally implanted in us, and is intended to reach its highest significance in the unveiled splendour which is to come. The similitudes used to prefigure "The Holy City" address themselves to this ideal of the human mind, and I could not, therefore, altogether blame myself if this recent vision of my mother's diamonds laid hold somewhat hauntingly of my thoughts.

That they were a family possession, coming to us by aristocratic descent, gave them an added preciousness in my eyes, and I was filled with a questionable pride in picturing to myself how my mother would shine unrivalled that evening both in person and adornments. I had just sense enough to have little vanity on my own account, and this was the one redeeming point amid many follies and vagaries of imagination.

I was still in the dressing-room when Merylle burst impetuously in. She had been out for a race with Fred, and had forgotten time and everything



else of sterling reality in the gambols and gaiety she loved.

"Where is mamma?" she exclaimed impatiently, as she glanced round the blue dressing-room. "I wanted to see her dressed. It's not possible she is gone?"

"She ought to have waited for you, I suppose?" was my rejoinder. "Do you know that it is just six o'clock, and the tea-bell is going to ring?"

"I was only round the back lane with Fred, hunting for blackberries," said Merylle. "You might have called me—— What had she on to-night?"

"Her black velvet," I said, and added no further description.

I was determined that the full light of the diamonds and their antecedents should not flash on her through any admission of mine. It was possible I was the only one of the children to be favoured with a view of them, and even for me the veil of mystery that surrounded them had not wholly been lifted. I remembered that my mother had sent Lucy out to the garden with the nurse when she went up to dress, and it seemed very probable that she wished for the present to avoid the eager questioning of the younger ones respecting a matter which could not fully be explained.

A few weeks went by, and one morning my mother received a letter by the early post which disturbed her greatly. But the excitement she showed was

evidently of a pleasurable nature, for her eyes brightened, and a sort of hopeful light passed across the delicate colouring of her face. I, with my rosy, healthy face, almost envied my mother and Lucy the soft, peach-like bloom which seemed to come to them as another heirloom from the lovely Lady Eleanor, and her high-born home and ancestors.

When the letter had been read it was passed hastily to my father, and I caught the whispered comment :

"There is hope yet—— You see there is hope, Richard."

The contents were perused more leisurely now ; but when they were finished, my father's countenance cleared also.

"If this be so, all may indeed be well," he murmured. "It would be a happy ending to a lifelong anxiety. You must take courage now, Eleanor."

The envelope of the letter chanced to lie on the table rather near me, and I saw that it bore a foreign stamp and post-mark. I was tolerably curious on the subject, but did not venture to ask any questions, for the all-sufficient reason that the answers would not have been directed to the gratification of inquisitiveness.

My heart bounded, however, with a certain excitement when my mother informed me after breakfast that she was going to see Uncle George, and that I might accompany her if I wished.

There was not much doubt about the inclination in

a case of the kind ; and a holiday having been given to Merylle and Lucy, I prepared myself promptly for the drive. My father was to remain at home, and the boys were summoned to him as usual in the study.

"I say, Nell, what's in the wind now?" exclaimed Fred, as he met me looking fussy and important in the hall. "Is there to be a 'turn out' at the old Manor-House that you are so eager to rush off to it? I should have thought a visit to Uncle George might have been taken uncommon cool."

"There has been a turn out for you, at all events, Master Fred," I retorted. "That is enough for you to know."

"Oh, a secret—eh?" he broke in, with a laugh. "Well, you girls beat for curiosity. I wouldn't give a snap of my finger for all you'll ever root out of that fusty old place."

"Sour grapes!" I said, as he bounded down the steps with his satchel on his shoulder. He was just starting for Mr. Locke's, but he turned when he had gone a step or two.

"Any message, Nell?" he asked. "Any private word for the 'pastor and master?'"

There was a mischievous gleam in his eyes, so I answered promptly:

"Yes; tell him to keep you well down, to set you double tasks, and not to spare you in any way on my account."

Fred gave a long whistle, and was soon out of

reach of messages like these. It was terribly trying to have a brother of his age, and one, moreover, who was vowed to the awful vocation of a tease. I was wise enough to pay as little heed to him as might be, and never to admit the possibility of sense on his side; but such a course reduced our intercourse to a very unsatisfactory basis. He could be nothing of a help to me—scarcely even a companion under circumstances like these.

During the drive to S—— my mother spoke on indifferent subjects, but made no special allusion to Uncle George, or her motive for paying him this early visit. Just, however, as we had reached the Manor-House, she leant towards me and said earnestly :

“Ellie, I want you to be very kind and loving with your uncle to-day. He has not been strong lately, and his health makes him irritable. But I believe he is really fond of you, and would like to see some affection on your side.”

“But, mother, how was I to know this?” I exclaimed. “He only finds fault when I see him. I am afraid almost to glance at him; my very looks seem to be wrong.”

“Naturally, my child, when there is fear in them. A frank, happy smile would work very different effect. The most stern heart opens to that. Do you not know that nothing wins love like trust and confidingness? It is this which makes the little one so dear to its parent.”

"But a constrained smile would be worse than none, mother. To try and show what I did not feel might be possible, but it would be worthless. How am I to *feel* as you and he wish? That is what I want to know."

"I cannot explain this to you, Ellie, if there is no responsive chord in your own breast, which answers to another's need. You see the desolate life which your uncle is living. A great grief has befallen him in his plans and hopes. I do not say he ought not to have battled against this, and shown his faith in a higher good than earthly weal. But we, on our part, may do something yet to help towards this end. We may let him feel that tenderness and truth are not banished from the world because they failed him once. If we can only move him from a hard incredulity, the springs of nature may become unlocked, and he may forget all that he has lost in the peace of forgiveness. As long as the one harsh element of implacability lingers in the heart, joy is shut out from it. It can neither know the light of Heaven upon the outer pathway nor in the inner life. There is the same dread shadow everywhere—the ghost of an extinguished love. To kill it in our own breast is to cause a double dearth. What we no longer give we no longer receive. We have hidden away lovingkindness from above."

I had listened to her, but in ignorance still of the story of Uncle George's life, I scarcely apprehended

all her meaning. When she had ceased speaking I was full of an eager thought of my own.

"Mother," I exclaimed rather irrelevantly, "why will Uncle George never see Fred?"

The gate at which we had already rung was opened at this instant by Willis.

"I cannot tell you now, Ellie," she said in a whisper. "Don't ask any further questions, but be as pleasant with your uncle as you can."

I was not fated, however, on this day to have opportunity for turning her gentle suggestion to account.

Willis's face looked longer than ever as he appeared in the aperture, and his whole person more dark and depressed. He waved his hand at us both with a dismissive gesture, and made no attempt to give way for our entrance.

"What is wrong, Willis?" inquired my mother anxiously. "Is your master worse?"

"He couldn't be that, ma'am," he said. "Not more bad than you left him the other day. But he's no better."

The man presumed on his long services and his privileged state as comptroller of the household within to constitute himself a sort of guardian of his master. He kept a Cerberus-like watch over his visitors and movements, and admitted no one to him unless he considered it well.

It appeared that Uncle George had not left his

room this morning. Consequently it was only by dint of repeated solicitation that even my mother gained access to his presence. As for me, I was shut out resolutely at once. Willis decreed that to allow my very foot inside the portal might be going a step too far, and he pointed grimly to the garden-walks and their grey surface of gravel as a befitting field of recreation.

Left here for almost half an hour, I began to feel the sombre influence of the place creeping dismally over me. There was no sound from the house, and the silence and loneliness to which I was so unaccustomed grew absolutely oppressive. Hitherto in my paces I had kept in view of the old domicile, but finally I turned down a side pathway which led more into the intricacies of the garden. This track was narrow, moss-overgrown, and had evidently fallen into disuse. Just around the house there was an attempt at order, but here all pointed from a melancholy present to a far-away past when trees had been shrubs, and the first bloom of youth and spring-time wove smiles and flowers along the path. There were traces of a little garden, a rockery, a rustic seat, and other devices of a child's hand. Whose was it which had been at work here, and wherefore was an air of deepest mournfulness enwrought with every token of its touch?

I paused suddenly before a closed door. It seemed to lead to some root-house or grotto, and was green

with age, while a veil of ivy and glossy evergreens fell thickly over the roof and upper portion of the entrance.

Strange to say, I had never been allowed to play or wander in these grounds when a child. Thus nothing could be remembered or had been noted before. Our visits to the Manor-House were almost always formed on the same rigid model: an introduction to the library, an inspection by Uncle George, and a steady retrogression of our steps to the carriage. Once only I had been sent upstairs to run about in the long corridor while my mother spoke alone with uncle; and in Fred's case he had been permitted an occasional climb of the cherry-tree when his presence was becoming visibly distasteful indoors.

I stood and gazed now, and as I did so I became aware that something was written on the portal. Letters had been cut in the wood-work and the grooves painted in deep red. They ran along the top margin of the door, so that the overhanging foliage almost concealed them now. But raising a branch of ivy with one hand, I bent closer, and read the single sentence:

“NEVER TO BE OPENED.”

I can't tell what strange shudder ran through me at the moment. It was not caused by the ominous inscription, but by a sort of prescient feeling that I touched here on the secret of Uncle George's life.



Though I was curious I was overawed as well. No wish sprang to mind to pass the threshold of that closed door. Whatever lay within I would not have dared to raise the double veil with which the touch of Nature and some harsher hand had shrouded the spot.

I was turning away when I was attracted by a beautiful flowering shrub at the side of the grotto. The blossoms were of a rich crimson hue, and drooped luxuriantly amid the shining green of the leaves. I had never seen it before, and leaving the path, I stepped in amongst the underwood to examine it more closely. It seemed some foreign species, and, wishing to know the name, I plucked a little bit to show to my mother.

I noted then that the planting all around the spot was of a choice and varied kind, as if it had engaged the special care of some one who had chosen and frequented the retreat. There was a sort of lattice-paned window high up in the summer-house, and involuntarily I drew a little nearer to the latter. In doing so, I came upon the trunk of an alder-tree—in fact it formed the back or central piece of the grotto, which had been built out from this foundation.

Here, again, curiosity was aroused. My quick eye discovered letters cut in the bark, but they were less distinct than the chill, prohibitory sentence traced on the front portal, and some school-boy's penknife had evidently been the one tool employed in the

work. Two words were what I made out, with just a date underneath. They were these :—"Fred's House."

As I read them I grew bewildered, and repeated them over and over in questioning intonation. Who was this Fred of whom I had never heard? and how came his name, and his name only, to speak out of the silence of the past? It was not my own brother Fred; the added date pointed to a time when his days of mirth and mischief were yet in the future. I had never known that Uncle George had a son. Indeed, from some answers to questions I put once to the servants, I had understood that he had no child, and that he had lost his wife within a year of their marriage.

As I still paused and pondered I heard myself called. I gave quite a tremulous start at the sound. The voice was Willis's, and I sprang hastily from the spot.

"Where have you been to, Miss Ellen?" he asked, as I came in sight from the winding of the shrubby walk. "Do you know that I have been calling you for the last ten minutes?"

"Is my mother ready?" I exclaimed. "Has she been waiting for me?"

No answer was needed, for another step brought me in view of the house, and I saw her standing on the gravel in front.

She was too full of thoughts of her own to direct

especial inquiries on my doings, and seated side by side together in the carriage we were both unusually absent on the drive back.

I, for my part, was only waiting and watching for an opportunity to speak and question, but till such was gained it seemed better wisdom to be silent. To touch on a subject which might prove forbidden ground would be rash at present, and might debar me from a future and more assured approach to it.

## CHAPTER X.

### IGNORANCE IS BLISS.

"Nothing is so certain to happen as the unforeseen."

"Les malheurs des malheurs sont ceux qui n'arrivent jamais."

"WHAT a shocking noise!" exclaimed my father, coming suddenly into the breakfast-room.

Since his return the children were still allowed to enjoy the first repast of the day with the heads of the household, though I must say they abused the privilege terribly. They were generally down some time before their parents' appearance, and turned the waiting interim to account by antics and exercises which sharpened their appetites, if not their wits.

Fred might have been supposed to rise superior to such pastimes, but he had too rare a field at like moments for the exercise of his special talents to slight the occasion.

Dick, in clean garments, was irresistibly enticing. He was always rather nice to tease; but when the freshness of a morning toilet enhanced his natural

advantages, and a hold could be laid firmly and fearlessly upon his small person, Fred, at least, could not abstain from divers little attentions. To trip him up, to give him an unexpected impetus in a hazardous direction, offered temptations which he scarcely cared to resist. Dick was good-humoured, rather of the gutta-percha type of construction, and always had a safe rebound to position again, no matter how recklessly he was treated.

On the present morning, however, he had been pitched, as ill-luck would have it, right upon George and a slice of bread and butter. The latter, hugged to the little wretch's heart, had suffered crumbling and collapse, and he broke into a wail forthwith. At this critical juncture my father entered. Dick naturally had acquired some butter in the collision, and was beaming with delight. This opening smear of the day was due to Fred, and no one could blame him if others followed.

My father, however, was more occupied with George's howls than Dick's smiles, and called all to order with an unwonted sternness.

"You have that child always in a roar," he said. "What is the cause of this?"

"It's Fred's fault," said Merylle glibly. "He tilted Dick up against him."

She had just had a passage-of-arms with Master Fred herself, and had not forgiven him a peculiarly envenomed pinch.

"And hurt him—eh?" asked my father, drawing George towards his knee.

"Not a bit of it, sir," said Fred boldly. "He had a shield in front—a thick cut of bread and butter."

"It's all gone now," murmured George; and his eyes followed pitifully the scattered fragments which were on the floor, his pinafore—everywhere, in fact, but in the safe receptacle he had designed for them.

He was not appeased till my mother had him mounted on his stool close by her side, and had plied him with a piece of muffin from her own plate.

We were still in the midst of breakfast when Fred gave a loud whistle, and almost sprang from his seat. He was placed opposite to the window, and had been the first to see what we all now heard—a carriage approaching on the gravel sweep. No one was expected, and an arrival at this hour was in itself a surprise. But a greater supervened.

Dick, ready and rapid, was at the window in a trice. A caper of astonishment followed, but then his fist clenched, and he made a hideous, almost menacing face.

"It's Aunt Rachel!" he said, and we all gave a sort of scream at the words.

Even my mother looked aghast. Hospitality was overpowered by apprehension. She rose hastily from her seat.

"It can't be," she exclaimed. "What could bring her again?"

"And she's got six boxes," roared Dick, "and a lot of bags inside. Do come and look, Ellie."

"Worse and worse!" interposed Fred. "She'll pitch her tent here for ever now. Mother, don't let her in!"

My father had already hurried out to the portico, so we were less reticent in our speech than dutifulness might have demanded.

"I can't understand this," pursued my mother anxiously. "I asked her to stay longer before she left us; but not only did she refuse this, but she hinted that we should not see her for years again."

"She has taken a longing fit for music," laughed Fred. "Merylle, run off to the piano, and give her a welcome at once. Don't spare the strings; we'll cobble them up again."

At this moment there was a rustle and a bustle in the hall, and we knew that aunt had entered. But farther than the doorway she was not free as yet to advance. She had taken a hired vehicle from the station, and her ideas of miles and money were so utterly opposed to those of the driver that we seemed likely to have him quartered upon us as well. He pushed his way into the very house, and made Aunt Rachel recoil before his crimsoning face ere she yielded up one jot of her ground. My father tried vainly to interfere. Aunt Rachel was not exactly so fond of her coins as afraid of cheater, and her own bargain must be made, and none other.

Meanwhile the man had revenge in his hands. Aunt's boxes were taken down one by one, and their numbers and weight emphasised by such resounding crashes on the doorstep that it seemed as if the very stone must fly to pieces. Aunt bore it all till her best bonnet was imperilled ; but at this crisis she woke up to a sense of a newly-threatened loss.

"That'll do—that'll do!" she cried wrathfully. "You'll smash everything to atoms. Take what you want—rob me as you please ; but I'll have you up in the courts for it yet."

"Give the man his money, Rachel," implored my father. "I'll settle it with you again."

"Settle him again, I hope you mean? The country is in a nice state. We might as well have highway-men upon the road."

Nevertheless the loosening of her bonnet-box had opened her purse-strings, and the man finally drove off with a grin and chuckle. The delight of victory always adds a peculiar zest to the more sterling gains we may have carried off in a contest, and I think in a matter of this kind, where one has generally to yield in the end, it might be as well to reduce the triumph of our opponent by placid acquiescence.

Aunt Rachel was terribly flushed when my mother came forward at last to greet her.

"I wish I had telegraphed!" was her first ejaculation. "It would have cost me a shilling, but saved



me this scene. My nerves are not strong enough for such struggles."

"But why did you not even write?" inquired my mother timidly.

She feared to say more—to ask the cause, or contemplated length of the visit. Aunt's outraged dignity would have been up at once at a word.

"I knew nothing of the start myself till last night," was the reply. "I had a letter from London by the evening post. The Countess Graukopf has just arrived from Germany. I met her, you know, once at Brighton. She wants me to join her there again, or rather I am to be with her in London early to-morrow, and we travel down together. I thought I would take a day here to rest by the way, and get my summer-hat which I forgot at the back of the wardrobe. It may be useful at the seaside."

"You must have been off betimes, this morning," interposed my father.

"At five o'clock. My maid sat up all night to pack. When a thing is to be done I like to do it well."

The beauty and burden of the work seemed to have rested here upon the maid; but aunt was satisfied, and that was a great deal.

I had caught sight of Dick cutting private capers at the announcement of her short stay. Aunt, however, seemed pleased at the exuberance of his spirits, and the manifest delight of his countenance.

"I do believe that boy is overjoyed to see me," she

exclaimed. "I did not think he had so much heart about him. Come here, Dick."

She plunged her hand in her pocket as she spoke. But at this motion Dick was forestalled. George was the first to respond. Aunt had once given him a sticky lollypop which I believe had adhered to her dress for about a century, and this gift lived gratefully in his memory. Nothing, however, was produced now from her research but a pair of very dubious kid gloves, and George's eyes filled at the sight. The disappointment was cruel, and even I felt for him in a degree.

"I *ought* to have something," pursued aunt, putting back the gloves with a pat, and that statement was true enough.

"Did you drop it?" murmured George, trying to control his voice. But the question might be embarrassing, and my mother pulled him forcibly away.

"Run back to your breakfast, George," she said. "And you, Rachel, won't you come in and have some refreshment after your early start?"

Aunt did not demur. Though she had nothing to offer others, she would not deprive them of the pleasures of hospitality. She was always content to waive her rights in this way, and leave her friends to prove the truth of the precept, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

One happy result for the children followed upon her arrival. A holiday had to be given. Since her visit

was so short a one it would be scarcely polite to leave her to spend it in loneliness, or to distract her by the shrill echoings of "The Witches' Frolic."

A long-planned treat was at once thought of, and the children begged for an extra-early dinner, and a gipsy-tea in the woods, where Mr. Locke and Fred could join us after an hour or two of trout-fishing. The proposal seemed a feasible one. In acting upon it they would be taken out of the risk of encounters with Aunt Rachel ; and, trusting the management of the party to me, my mother gave in a willing consent.

The autumn weather was still and lovely. The rich colouring in which everything was now clad, not only presented brilliant pictures to the eye but called up brightening thoughts to the heart. I think the imagination shuts up under chill skies, and opens with a sort of bound at the first flash of heat or sunshine. I know I felt an indescribable sense of happiness stealing over me as a soft perfumed air greeted me like a caress, and wherever my glance fell an answering smile seemed given back by a glowing and grateful world.

Lucy was on a donkey ; Dick held the bridle, and Merylle and George trotted along, one on either side. Fred had not returned from his morning studies with Mr. Locke, but was to have luncheon with him, proceed then on the fishing excursion, and meet us subsequently in a little dell near the trout-stream, which we had fixed upon as the scene of the afternoon's

repast. Lucy's balance on the donkey was kept steady by well-weighted packages in the opposite pannier, and I need scarcely say that it was to this side of the steed that George was wedded in his promenade. His interest was unflagging in the safe conveyance of the provision-basket; his steps unwearied as long as this goal of his hopes lay close under his eye. His watch, however, had to be relinquished at last. There was a little cottage at the opening of the wood where I determined to leave the donkey and one half of its burden, and to let the children play about and gather wild flowers while I attempted a water-colour sketch of a rustic bridge in the vicinity. This programme was adopted with only one variation in its details.

Blackberries—not blossoms—were to be the object of search of the younger ones; and as the quest would doubtless prove more engrossing than the one I had proposed, I yielded gracefully to the amendment. One would have thought no harm could come to even the most incorrigible scapegrace on level ground, and amid the quietude of woodland loveliness. But there are boys who baffle all sane calculations.

I was giving the finishing touches to my sketch when I heard an outcry. The voice was George's, and he was running towards me with his eyes more excited and his mouth more wide open than I had ever seen them except in a case of special feasting.

"What is the matter?" I exclaimed, starting from my seat and letting my portfolio fall unheeded to the ground. To see George in this state was to awaken alarm at once.

"Dick's gone!" he cried. "Come quick—quick—Ellie! or we shall never get him back."

I flew at the words. Action was more to the point than interrogation where George was concerned. Seeing me set in motion, he had already in a measure collapsed into calm—that is, his face had become stolid again, though his feet scampered along still, leading me in the direction of a neighbouring thicket. Here I was greeted by new outcries. Merylle and Lucy were both screaming and executing some sort of wild dance around a hollow circle in the ground.

On approach, this proved to be a pitfall, and to my horror I perceived the top of Dick's head some way beneath the surface. He was uttering no sound or appeal himself, which was anything but reassuring, and I bent towards him in terror.

"Dick! Dick! Are you hurt?" I exclaimed.

He tried to give me a glance in reply, but at the mere motion of his head, down he went farther, and even I screamed at the sight. I threw myself by the side of the cavity, and stretching out an arm, caught him eagerly round the neck.

"Don't—don't choke me!" he blurted out then. "I'm all right, if you'll only get me up."

But that was easier said than done. The children were utterly helpless. The very force of their cries seemed to give shocks to the quaking ground, and render his footing more tremulously insecure, while their feeble little hands, if they attempted to take hold of him, succeeded only in grasping him for a second, and let go so suddenly that he was dropped down as by a fresh impetus. It was better, I saw, to depend only on my own resources, and waving them all back, I leant towards Dick again, and implored him to catch me round my neck, if he objected to a clasp of his own. He was not averse to this step, and by dint of vigorous springs and plunges of his feet beneath, while his arms gave me an almost throttling seizure, he rose finally to the surface. I could scarcely help laughing then. He was so encompassed and encrusted with his favourite dust and mire that even his ambition must have been satisfied. For the first time I detected something approaching to a disconsolate look as he ran his eye over his ruined garments, and attempted to rid himself of some superfluous earth which had gathered in his hair and ears.

George looked on stolidly, and, to my surprise, Dick gave him a sudden push at the moment.

"It was he did it!" he cried; "and the little cad only shrieked then and helped me farther in. He wanted to get the best bunch of blackberries, and knocked me anywhere."

George's sensitiveness, which my mother had such touching belief in, came to the front here. He set up a dismal wail, and I had harder work to pacify him than to get Dick out of the pitfall. I expected Mr. Locke and Fred to put in a speedy appearance, and I was anxious that matters should for once have a smooth aspect before the curate. But if I had had an undue confidence earlier in my powers of management, the conceit was to be cured by signal discomfiture.

I heard a call from Fred, followed by quick footsteps through the thicket, while George's eyes were still red and Dick grimy. To heighten the unpleasantness, the party was enlarged beyond what I had expected. The rector's son, Tom, as well as the eldest girl, Julia, had been met by Fred, and were invited by him with easy hospitality to partake of our picnic repast. Though I was not good at arithmetic, as I need scarcely announce, my first effort was at a mental calculation respecting the size and number of my meat-patties and jam-tartlets, and their possibilities of going round the guests. It would have been well now if I could have done "long division," and by some mysterious process of this kind have stretched out my supplies so as to suffice and satisfy.

I did not care for Julia Horton, and I fear this unamiable prejudice brought a new feature of vexation into the matter. I had privately denounced her as "stupid," and to take any trouble for a girl of that

kind seemed to me a waste of time and intelligence. However, there she was. Fred had only been her pioneer by a second of space, and I was compelled to bring something of graciousness into my reception.

Mr. Locke was standing near, and though a gentleman is engaged, he is still free to observe, it may be to disapprove ; so we must be allowed to show ourselves engaging. The smiles I had summoned up were not wholly hypocritical, for I liked Tom well enough, and, as usual, Mr. Locke's pleasant face threw a brightness over everything. Dick's figure attracted him speedily. He drew him towards him, despite of perilous contact, and gave him a sort of friendly shake.

"Where have you been to?" he questioned, with amusement in his eyes. "You have made acquaintance with the rabbits, or their burrows, at all events. I suppose 'Alice in Wonderland' has led to this ; but I believe your sister would be quite as well pleased if you had a less inquiring mind."

"Or acquiring person," I corrected. "The amount of dust and daubs he contracts in the day is something incalculable. If I had my will, I would clothe him in mackintosh, like Captain Boyton, and then he might take to the water or what he liked without risk or ruination."

Dick was impervious to either reasoning or remarks, so I ventured on mine without fear of a response like George's. In fact, he was what every one called "a



fine boy," though I have reason to dread the expression. It seems to point to a state of untutored recklessness, and to encourage tendencies which may be manly, but are certainly not refining.

We all turned now towards the wood cottage where the provisions were in waiting, and this was the first move which cheered up George at all. He had had a shy, shattered look about him up to this, which, in conjunction with reddened eyes, was calculated to convey the impression that I had been boxing and beating him. As we walked along, I found Mr. Locke at my side. His first question put me in a flutter of apprehension, for it reminded me of a neglected duty.

"I hope Mrs. Wynham is well," he began, "and that the home teaching does not entirely devolve upon you now? You were to have more time to yourself, you told me, when your father and mother returned."

"Oh yes, there is nothing wrong," I rejoined hastily. "The time is there, I suppose; but it goes faster than I can keep up with it."

"You promised me, you know, to visit the schools," he interposed.

I was silent for an instant. I was ashamed to confess the real facts of the case, namely, that for two consecutive weeks I had completely forgotten the visiting-day when it came round. I always remembered it on the following morning; but this was of little use, since six days more of other thoughts and works were sufficient again to erase it from my mind.

"I hope to go to-morrow," I stammered at last. "I have been busy ; that is to say, in some ways ; in others, I am afraid, not so—inactive rather."

"Your memory was not busy? Is that what I am to understand?" he asked with a smile.

"Precisely, Mr. Locke. I was reluctant to admit it ; but I might as well have done it frankly, as leave it to your superior sagacity to suggest."

"Once you make a beginning, it will be different," he said. "The business, whether you find pleasure in it or the reverse, will naturally, then, by some process of impression, lay claim to your thoughts."

"Oh, I hope it will be pleasant," I ejaculated. "I shouldn't like to undertake anything with regularity that is to be disagreeable."

"If you bring the aforesaid regularity to bear upon it, you will not find it so bad, Miss Wynham. Habit, you know, is our second nature. It is surprising how the most uncongenial tasks become attractive in the end, if pursued in the spirit of determination. At the same time, I don't imply for a moment that a tidy row of little school-children will impress you unfavourably, or excite this distaste. You have had practice in the line, too ; and teaching, I believe, is rather your strong point."

"Who told you that, Mr. Locke? I wish you had seen me in the midst of the little ones when I was the sole head at home, and you would not have thought my talent for order, at all events, very great. To be

sure, they *are* hopeless children. Merylle thinks noise music, George becomes blank at the very sight of a book. To feed his mind is an impossible attempt as long as his actual appetite is so insatiable ; and as to Dick——”

“ Well, what about Master Dick ? ” and Mr. Locke had another smile for the rogue.

“ If his brain works,” I said, “ it is only by dint of physical exertion—rumpling his hair, and rubbing at his slate. By the time he has a row of figures cast up, he is a figure himself. He is proud of his proficiency in sums, but I defy any one to make out whether he is right or wrong, the confusion is so terrible.”

Speaking thus we had reached the hut, and my stores were presently opened out. They had grown smaller and smaller, I thought, and the papers more voluminous, as I unfolded pies and patties from their wrappings. The party, on the other hand, seemed to augment in importance. Julia, I perceived, had on a new dress, and when she seated herself, with the folds outspread, I almost shrank from the shabby offering I could make. Fred sprang to the rescue in a most heedless manner. He took the dish of patties from my hand, and, with reckless generosity, flung three or four of them into Miss Julia’s lap.

“ They are so small ! ” he exclaimed. “ You should take a good dozen at once ! ”

I almost sprang from my seat, but, controlling my-

self with an effort, I dived into the lemonade-basket, and brought up two bottles and a cork-screw. This was all that could be produced. The children were to have had milk, and I thought this supply of the effervescing beverage would have sufficed for Mr. Locke, Fred, and myself. The first idea of the gipsy-tea had been abandoned, as involving risks with the tinder and firebrands, which could scarcely be run in Dick's company. Thus the repast was of a mixed and anomalous character ; but this would have mattered little if it had not been of the scanty order, too. However, I laid little claims to my share of it. My appetite was really gone from nervousness, and I refused every lavish suggestion of Fred. The patties, meanwhile, which had been scattered by him too profusely, were safely picked up by George, so that no waste was incurred here, and the viands went round better than I had expected. Mr. Locke talked so pleasantly and continuously, I don't think he had opportunity to demolish much ; but he appeared to enjoy himself all the same, and, on the way back, kept the whole party in good spirits, as well as order.

On reaching the house I saw my mother watching for us in the portico. She beckoned me in, but told the others to run and join Aunt Rachel and my father, who were out walking somewhere in the grounds. I was made a little anxious by her manner, and still more so when she asked me gravely to come up with her to her own room. When we had entered the

pretty boudoir she closed the door, and then approaching the sofa she pointed me to a seat by her side.

"Ellie," she began earnestly, "you have often wished to learn something which I thought it as well to spare you the knowledge of for a while. But, if you still desire it, you shall hear all now."

My face grew full of eagerness in a moment.

"Is it about Uncle George?" I interposed quickly.

"Yes," was the reply. "An unexpected change has given matter for new thought and action. It would be impossible to keep you in ignorance much longer of one important event which approaches. It may be right, therefore, that you should know everything."

The decision delighted me. I little imagined all that it involved, or how the secrets which puzzle us lie often behind a veil which we lift only at the peril of our own peace and lightheartedness. Wherever curiosity lingers, there will be carelessness as to the means by which we may satisfy it, and nothing but hard experience will teach us to recognise the bliss of ignorance.

## CHAPTER XI.

### THE VISION ON THE STAIRCASE.

"Our acts our angels are, or good or ill,  
Our fatal shadows that walk by us still."

FLETCHER.

MY longing, nevertheless, was not to be so speedily gratified as I had thought. My mother was just beginning her narration when a call came from Aunt Rachel. We had believed her safe with my father, but I suppose the advent of the children was the signal for her flight. In any case, she bustled in now, anxious, as she said, for a consultation with my mother. I need scarcely add that the important matter concerned here touched on divers mysteries of the toilet, and some projected purchases which she was to make in London.

I felt greatly vexed at the interruption, but it only involved a delay. A promise once given, I had no fear respecting its fulfilment. Questions and pleadings need not be put into force in the future. My mother would be as anxious as myself to end the mystification for me, and carry out what she had

determined on. But a stronger will than either of ours had decreed that the communication was to be made in an unexpected place and under circumstances more impressive than could have attended the disclosure amid the surroundings of my own bright home.

Aunt Rachel was in no way deterred now by any token of preoccupation in my mother's manner from becoming expansive on the subject nearest to her heart. She opened up one of her boxes, unfolded a new dress, aired the flowery borders of a French cap, and exhibited on her own person the special "cut" of a lace mantilla before she had satisfied her claims on another's attention. The first dinner-bell rang then, and no hope remained to me of a quiet time with my mother for that day.

I was looking from the window of my room, having just finished my dressing, when I caught sight of a man on horseback riding up to the door. The next thing I heard was my mother's voice in anxious tones giving orders for the carriage to be brought round. She was standing in the lobby at the head of the stairs as the directions were issued, and the moment after she opened the door of my room.

"Ellie," she said, "get ready quickly. Your uncle George is very ill, and has sent for me. He mentioned you, too; you are to come with me."

My first feeling was of awe, almost of fright. A visit to the strange, mournful house had always a

certain significance about it, even in the hours of warmth and daylight, but to enter it in dusk and dimness, with the saddening weight of sickness overhanging its portal, would involve additional tremors.

My mother noticed my expression in an instant.

"Do you not wish to accompany me?" she asked. "There is no need to do so if you have any reluctance. Remember, I don't urge it."

My answer was a sudden kiss of assurance.

"Oh yes, I will go," I exclaimed. "If you are to leave us, I shall be happier with you. How soon are we to start, mother?"

"Immediately, now. You may make but slight preparation. I trust we shall find your uncle better, and that we may be able to return to-morrow or next day."

She left me then, and we were both quick in our movements, and met almost at the same time in the hall. But here a scene was awaiting us. When the children saw the carriage come round, and my mother ready for another departure, they clung about her imploringly. George's eyes filled up, and she could scarcely loosen her gown from his hold. With the withdrawal of her presence seemed to pass all the sustaining pleasure of his life, and that his affection for her was bound up with the deeper roots of self-love and self-need, did not make it the less powerful in its action.

As to Lucy, she set up a little cry at once, which



some interference on the part of Aunt Rachel developed into sobs and struggles. I believe the appearance of the latter personage on the scene had a good deal to say to the rising emotion of the flock. It seemed ominous somehow; they could scarcely separate it from a recent time of trial, when the absence of the one dearest to them was so closely associated with it. However, my father came to the rescue with caresses and assurances, and the two youngest were appeased in a measure.

As to Fred, Merylle, and Dick, they viewed us with bewildered eyes too wide open to give room for any other organ to come into play. For once they were speechless. But this unexampled state of calm was to pass off in an access of double excitement. Fred was the first to break into movement, and I felt a sudden clap on my shoulder, the result of reaction.

"Nell, you don't say it!" he exclaimed. "It can't be that you are going too?"

"I wish you would not hit me in that way, Fred," I returned; "it's a queer style of taking leave. Of course I am going. My mother wishes it, and Uncle George as well."

"And to sleep there—to pass a night in that house! You'll never do it."

"I suppose you mean, *you* wouldn't?" was my retort. "I don't see what I have to be afraid of."

"Of course you don't, or you'd feel rum, I can tell you. But there! I mustn't shake you to pieces before

the time. Good-bye, Nellie!" And he gave me something intended to be a hug this time, but which, to speak the truth, approached more nearly to a throttle.

The rest of the farewells were quickly exchanged, and Aunt Rachel, who assumed a measure of importance again, as the only lady left in charge, stood the last on the doorstep, waving her handkerchief.

As we drove in the open carriage, with Thomas on the box directly in front, no confidential conversation could be entered into on the way to the Manor-House. We had not waited for the late dinner, but the cook had put in a basket with sandwiches, pastries, and fruit, with which I amused myself for a while. As to my mother, she had little appetite, and I saw that her eyes watched each cottage and landmark along the road, as if she were only eager for the rapidity of our progress.

"Is uncle so very ill?" I ventured at length. "There is nothing of immediate danger to be feared, is there?"

"I trust not, Ellie. Willis is inclined to make the worst of things. Still he wrote for me in evident anxiety. Your uncle has had a threatening of heart disease in connection with his attacks of gout, and that is always alarming."

Meanwhile, the light was fading from the horizon; the autumn day assumed a touch of melancholy. It was dusk—that sad, solemn hour when there is neither sun nor star, when the mourning garb drawn on for the

dead day has not been lightened by one glimmer of white. At such a time any shadow upon the thoughts is doubly intensified. We seem separated from the hope within the heavens, which has become so mysteriously veiled. The upward glance is met by no response. There is naught but loneliness in the sky. It has been forsaken the first, and turns a desolate look upon the earth. I gave an instinctive shiver as we alighted at the gloomy gates of the Manor-House, and only for the presence of my mother, the ordeal of an entrance would have been difficult to bear. Willis, who appeared promptly in answer to our ring, had a face calculated to appal any one. Always lank and lugubrious, there was something ominous, even awful, in his expression now, and he ushered us speechlessly into the house. He was really, I believe, attached to his master, and whatever was the mournful secret of Uncle George's life, he, I felt sure, knew it all, and gave him more than sympathy. My mother went up at once to uncle's room, but Willis demurred to my admission as yet, and I was led to a dreary place of waiting. This was a small oak-panelled parlour, opening off one of the back passages. The library, the only apartment familiar to me, was locked up, as was always the case when uncle was not there himself in the midst of his treasured books and papers. Willis laid down a metal candlestick with solemnity on the centre-table. A tall attenuated candle burned in the former, and cast fickle, sickly gleams on the sombre objects of the room.

These were few in number, and of forbidding solidity and stiffness of aspect. A high-backed chair, a black cabinet, a sort of sarcophagus in the far corner, and a set of stern book-shelves encircling the walls—such, with the centre-piece referred to, formed the sole surroundings to which I was left. The dreariness seemed unbearable after a while. Willis had asked if I would have a cup of tea brought to me, but I had refused. Loneliness in this house was something too pursuing and affrighting to enable me to enjoy aught in connection with it. Cheered by the presence of my mother, all would become different, and I said I would wait till she came down. Minutes went on, and this waiting grew oppressive. I could only endure it in constant motion, and I went again and again round the room, pausing just for a second before the shelves, with their dusty burden of darkened, discoloured books. I could have no inclination to touch or open one, for all were alike uninviting in their titles and bindings. They seemed to have been chosen with a regard to what was dingy and dismal, and to embody something of the peculiar tastes and temper of their rigid owner. The half light, too, in which I found myself did not invite to any special research, and the dead stillness of the house would have become more unnerving had I attempted reading or reverie.

All at once I heard myself called. I thought so, at least, and starting eagerly forwards, I turned the handle of the door. Looking into the passage, I saw

that all was motionless, and wrapped now in a mantle weightier than dimness—the gloom of actual night. Again I fancied my name was uttered. I went back, seized the candle, and passed swiftly into the corridor. In my haste and confusion I took the way opposite to that leading to the hall, and a few steps brought me to a pause at an ominous spot. I just raised my eyes, and would have retreated instantly. I was at the foot of the back staircase. But in that upward glance something had attracted me. A light gleamed for one second overhead, and, believing that my mother must be here, I sprang up a step or two.

“Mother! mother!” I murmured, but no answer reached me. Perchance my tone was almost inaudible from awe. Be it as it might, I must find her, if she were beyond reach of hearing. The closed door which Fred had broken through could no longer form a barrier, else I should not have caught that sudden glimmer of light. There was a bend in the staircase, just at the bottom; but this passed, I came immediately in view of a long straight flight.

I gazed up it and stopped, my pulses coming to a pause too, and a sort of icy tremor gathering around my heart. Some one was standing at the top. One glance showed me who it was, and with parted lips I broke into a wild cry.

“Fred! Fred!” I called out, “what is this? What brings you here? Oh! don’t terrify me in this way!”

Then I sprang back a pace, held the candle

stretched out in advance, and my faculties woke up to a clearer sense of the vision. It was Fred still, but his semblance only. A full-length portrait in life-like attitude was set into the wall at the very head of the staircase. I went upwards, continuing to keep the light in front of me, and when I came nearer I gazed long and steadfastly on the picture. I knew now that it was not our own Fred, but I had never seen such a strong resemblance between any two faces before. There was the same handsome forehead, close curling hair, and, above all, the careless look, half-daring, half-constraining, which was Fred's special characteristic, and was a force in itself to condone faults and check rebuke. The nature shown here was one plainly to be led, not driven, and in which the affection that spoke in the frank brow and smiling eyes was the one element to be caught hold of and trusted to.

The bewilderment with which I had first viewed the picture yielded gradually to a species of mesmeric attraction, and I could scarcely withdraw my eyes from it. Though it represented a lad of about fourteen or fifteen, just at Fred's present age, it had evidently been taken long years before, and my mind flew away in thoughts and conjectures, conjuring up a time when the original had been full of boyish hope and happiness. What had passed since? Where was he now, and wherefore was his very memory a thing to be blotted out? Was it death which had drawn

this curtain over his presence, which had shut him off in such a cold and cruel oblivion ?

Suddenly, with a fresh longing for my mother, an irrepressible need of her vicinity, I started from my inaction. I perceived then that the door covered in red cloth, which Fred had broken through, was open now, also one beyond that led directly into the long corridor. Thus the portrait, which had been hidden away in a sort of recess between the two doors, stood out once more in its lifelike position at the head of the staircase, the eyes looking down and gazing earnestly at any one who came up the flight. Fred, I suppose, in his eager bound, anywhere for escape, had not stopped to note a picture, or think that this could have been the mystery buried so strangely from sight by Uncle George.

When I had passed the second door I was in the principal corridor off which the bedrooms of the house opened, and I caught sight of a light burning in a broad candlestick and laid on the floor about midway down. A door near was partly ajar, and, as I approached, it was opened more fully, and my mother stepped out. I went towards her impulsively.

"Oh, come down!" I exclaimed. "Come down quickly, mother. I can't bear it longer."

"Hush, Ellie!" she murmured, and put her finger on her lips. "Your uncle is just falling off to sleep. I heard some stir, and called you once, but then I thought you must have gone back. I cannot leave

my post just yet, but if you send up Willis, or one of the servants, I shall be with you immediately."

I hastened on at her words, and as I was nearer to the front staircase now I descended by it. Finding my way to the parlour I rang the bell, and after a delay the butler answered it. He carried in a small tray, which he laid down with an air of importance. There was nothing on it but some meagre slices of bread and butter, a tiny tea-pot, cream-jug, and two cups and plates.

Notwithstanding the limited nature of the array, it was set forth with a lengthy elaborateness which put me out of all patience. Arresting him in the process almost sharply, I begged him to go at once to his master's room, and release my mother from her attendance there. Willis eyed me slowly at the request, made some further irritating rattle with the tea-equipage, but finally hobbled off, and I heard him go towards the front staircase.

When my mother came to me at last, she lighted up two tall candles which were on the mantelpiece. These threw a ray of greater cheerfulness on the dingy furniture of the chamber, and when we were seated opposite to one another at the little table, and she had begun to pour out tea, something more home-like stole around the scene.

"I think your uncle is better, Ellie," said my mother after a pause. "But he may get some rest now, and even if he awaken again it is as well for you



not to see him to-night. I have had a room prepared for you and myself just opposite to his, and Willis, who always sleeps in his dressing-room, will let me know if there is any change."

I was sipping my unsweetened tea as she spoke. Sugar, I suppose, was a sinful luxury not to be thought of under the rigid rule of uncle's establishment.

"Mother," I returned, "you promised to tell me all about Uncle George, and other matters which have puzzled me, when we should next be alone together. But I think I know something already. Had not Uncle George a son?"

"He had—*he has*," was her murmured response. "That is the secret-burden on his life—on mine. That son grieved him; nay, more, wronged him. But he is penitent now. Yet your uncle cannot forgive. I say *cannot* because I believe as his heart feels at present the act of pardon would be actually impossible to him.

"It is this which is so woful. Your uncle is very ill; his son, too, has been at the point of death, yet nothing would move the father to a reconciliation. Oh, it is terrible to see this hardness on the very brink of the grave. We, who have to pray every day to have our transgressions blotted out, how are we to be heard and answered if forgiveness is not in ourselves? Where is the love here to draw us to the All-merciful One when compassion is hidden away from our own

flesh? 'He that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?'"

My mother was greatly moved. Her own heart, full of an indescribable and irrepressible tenderness, felt a pang in picturing only this condition of icy isolation. The harsh human instinct which impels to rancour was conquered in her case by the divine spirit of charity, and she looked with tears upon the stubbornness which is born of a fatal pride, which knows not that it is dragging our fallen nature to the very lowest depths, under the illusion of upraising it.

"What did his son do?" I ventured, after a protracted pause. "Tell me all, mother."

"I scarcely like to speak of it now," she returned with her old gentleness. "Now, when to explain everything truly and fully, I must say hard things of one who is lying in suffering so near us, who may soon have to pass from our presence into that of a higher judge. Still, Ellie, I have made a promise, and if you wish you shall hear the story."

My curiosity was aroused, and I pleaded to have it withheld no longer. My mother had my hand in hers when she began the recital.

"I have spoken to you of your grandmother, Ellie," she said. "She had but two children who survived—your uncle George and myself. There is a great difference in our ages, but she was delicate for years, and lost several children. Then when I came, and was

spared to her, she made me her chief pet and care. I think this embittered my brother in some way. He was passionately attached to his mother, and could not bear that her affection should be even divided, and that he should lose any measure of the exclusive devotion which had been given to him hitherto as an only child. Even then he became morbid, and gave way often to a jealous and unreasonable spirit. He married early, and it was hoped his wife, who was very winning and lovable, would have had a softening effect on his temper. But he lost her in the first year of their wedded life. She died a few weeks after the birth of her boy. Your uncle was living then in this old Manor-House, which he has never left since. This sudden blow, this rupture of the new affection to which he had trusted, had the effect of deepening his gloom and his peculiarities, and he became a complete recluse. On quitting your grandfather's house at the time of his marriage, he had been annoyed that his father had not made him a more liberal allowance. The habits of economy which were induced at first by something of necessity, turned later to penuriousness. He shut himself up in a sombre solitude which was only relieved by the brightening presence of his little child. That child was only four years younger than myself, and whenever I could get him as a playfellow, I was attracted by his gaiety and joyousness. He was a boy full of health and spirits, with a wonderfully winning face, and who gained

everything by the mere compelling influence of his look——”

“He was like Fred, was he not, mother?” I interposed quickly.

“Yes, the resemblance is striking. You would see it, above all, in the portrait which was taken of your cousin Frederick, at the age of fifteen, and which your uncle, from some odd whim, had inserted in the wall at the head of the back staircase. His own room was then just at the top of the flight, and I fancy he liked to gaze on this well-loved face as he went slowly up the steps——”

“Then he was fond of him once?” I murmured.

“Fond, Ellie! Ah, it was more than that—there was the danger. He idolised him, adored him, and as we never enshrine anything or any one in this world in too high a place but it is shattered from its throne, thus he had to look later upon a ruin. Love is a rightful instinct of our nature, but not idolatry. That is a false, failing feeling, and the proof is, that let us be disappointed in the object of our devotion, and anger instantly chases away affection; we would crush what we once worshipped.”

“But what did he do, mother? What did this poor Fred do?”

“You shall hear it all, Ellie, but I must tell you first of what happened beforehand. Your uncle grew daily more strange and miserly. He had his son educated, it is true, at a good school, but in small

minor matters which would have given him pleasure, and have responded to the needs and wishes of his young buoyant heart, he was kept sternly in check. There was the capricious, contradictory system of allowances and restraints adopted which is peculiar to some phases of the penurious mind. Fred never knew exactly what extravagance might be sanctioned or what petty expenditure would be condemned. It is scarcely surprising that under such discipline he grew both reckless and reticent. He could not make a friend or confidant of his father, for he reproved him often for an act of generosity, and again, showed little or no concern about money which went in some ostentatious outlay. He entered a college at Oxford, and I believe he fell in here with a wild set of companions. In any case, debts were contracted which he feared to disclose, and he grew less and less open with his father. It was just at this time that your brother Fred was born, and was named after his grandfather Merlin and his cousin. I was living then in a small house in a country town, where your father practised as a physician. My mother had died a few years previously, and the heirloom of her valuable diamonds had descended to me, as her only daughter."

My mother paused here for a second, and at the moment we heard a step in the passage outside, and Willis opened the door.

"My master is awake," he said, "but he doesn't seem no better. I think we ought to send for the doctor."

Uncle had such a distaste to the presence of a physician, or possibly rather to the fees which it entailed, that none had been summoned as yet. He saw my father occasionally in a friendly way, and allowed him to prescribe for him ; and it was a visit from him that my mother thought it best to propose now.

"He could come early in the morning, Willis," she said. "It might only alarm your master to bring any one in to-night."

Willis agreed to this. In fact, I think he had intruded on us without any special cause, or wish for immediate action, merely with the design of being disagreeable. I had never liked the man from the time I was a child, and he knew this so well that he took revenge for my prejudice by a temper bordering upon incivility. He had contrived to interrupt the conversation now which I so much wished to prolong, and he bustled over his miserable tea-things and their removal with the same provoking dilatoriness as before.

## CHAPTER XII.

### TOLD IN THE NIGHT.

"A sacred burden is this life ye bear,  
Look on it, lift it, bear it solemnly,  
Stand up and walk beneath it steadfastly.  
Fail not for sorrow, falter not for sin,  
But onward, upward, till the goal ye win."

F. A. KEMBLE.

AN interruption is always irritating, but I must say I rebelled against it, especially when it came from the part of Willis. As if he had wished purposely to provoke me, he did not retire with his tea-tray, but lingered on, talking to my mother about uncle and his failing health, and emphasising his own attention and devotion to him as something priceless and unprecedented. It was well known that uncle had remembered the man liberally in his will, and thus the disinterested nature of his care was not to me particularly striking.

His oration ended, my mother had to go up to see the invalid, and thus she had no opportunity for continuing her recital till we were together in our room

at night. She told me then of a sudden shock she had had while our Fred was still a baby, by hearing of a dreadful rupture between her brother and his son. The latter had been forced at last by pressing necessity to confess his debts, and his father's rage knew no bounds. To require of him his treasured hoards to satisfy rapacious and disreputable claimants was like the demand of a burglar. He would as soon have given up his life, and his son was literally driven from his doors.

"He had been disappointed and deceived in him, it is true," pursued my mother; "but he was his child still, and this was treating him like a hireling. He rushed thence to ruin, to despair, tried at races and gambling-tables to gain what no entreaties could get, and became more deeply involved."

She paused again, and remembering where she had broken off before, I interposed with eagerness:

"And the diamonds, mother? You were telling me something about them when Willis came in to-night."

"Yes, Ellie, and I will end all in a word or two now. These gems being very precious, had been enclosed in an ancient casket, and as my mother, Lady Eleanor, had been in failing health for some years before her death, and unable to go into company, they were deposited at her banker's. At her decease, your uncle George came in for a good deal of money which was lying there, and when he was removing it, he



asked me what I would wish to have done about the diamonds. At the time, as I mentioned to you, I was living in a small house, and my establishment was not such as I could wholly trust. I accepted his offer then to take charge of the casket for me, and I conceived if it would be safe anywhere, it would be in his very close and careful hands. Anything of a miser's spirit is not satisfied, I believe, without repeated and personal inspection of the secret stores, and your uncle, assuming that I must partake of the same anxiety, was always eager to exhibit the diamonds to me whenever I paid him a visit at the Manor-House. There came a day, however, when this display could no longer be made—something dreadful, terrible, had happened. They had been taken from him, together with a good deal of gold and other valuables—taken by his own son! There was no doubt of this, he had been seen in the house at night by Willis, had entered and escaped by the window of his own bedroom, had drawn the key of the strong-box from under his father's pillow while he slept, and thus succeeded in the fatal act. Your uncle, Ellie, never recovered that blow. In his first wild wrath he would have had the unhappy youth pursued. To regain his treasures seemed dearer to him than the reputation, the life even of his son. But I besought him, almost on my knees, to refrain. What could be the lustre of gold or diamonds to us henceforth, if such a stain as this should sully our name and house? I prevailed in the

end, but from that hour your uncle became childless. No one dared mention, whisper even, of that fairer past when a bright lovely boy had been his pride and hope. All remembrance of him seemed erased from the father's heart, and crime, which had blotted out his name in the future, had let a pall fall over his very existence. It was from this cause that the presence of our Fred became gradually unbearable to your uncle. The likeness between him and his hapless cousin grew strange and striking, and I saw that your uncle shrank from his aspect. I did not, in consequence, always bring him in with me to the library, but on one occasion, when I had left him outside, he burst impetuously into the room, full of heedless boasting of some bet he had won from Willis, and your uncle rose then, quivering with a terrible emotion. 'Let me never see that boy again, Eleanor!' he cried in an awful tone, and frightened at his wrath, I sent you all hastily away. Fred was only a little fellow at the time, but there was something in his face and his daring manner and expression which reminded even me too vividly of the first Fred in his days of freedom and innocence. Your uncle spoke to me so harshly and bitterly when you had left, of what he termed my 'cruelty,' that the tears sprang to my eyes, and I could scarcely control myself when I came out to you in the carriage."

"I remember the day well," I interrupted, "and I often wondered what had happened. I don't think

Fred ever visited with us at the Manor-House afterwards?"

"No," pursued my mother; "and I had determined not to bring any of you again. But I could not take revenge on one whom I pitied too much to blame. Your uncle asked for you the next time—you especially, Ellie—and so the visits were resumed. I know well—I feel it deeper than words can explain—that his heart is not so closed as it seems. All may be well yet, if we can but carry out what your father and I have planned——"

"And what is that?" I asked quickly.

"It is something in which you must help us, Ellie," she returned. "I have told you this sad story for two reasons. First, because your restless eagerness to learn it might have led to partial discoveries of your own, which would leave you free to talk; and this must not be at any cost. In the next place, you might possibly do something, ever so little, towards working to the desired end. I think I said to you that this unhappy son is deeply penitent; indeed, years ago he wrote to his father, imploring forgiveness, and stating that his whole life was blighted by his terrible crime. He besought for one word or token of pardon, and added that if this would be given, he would ask nothing more till he could return, with the weight lifted in a measure from off his conscience, and restore all that he had taken. To this appeal your uncle gave no answer. His son was

dead to him—worse than that, his very memory was annihilated—death is not such a slayer as this. I had no knowledge of where he was, or I would have written on my part. But a few months ago I had a letter——”

“From America?” I exclaimed.

“Yes; your cousin had fled there. There he has been for the last fourteen years, working, labouring day and night, to enable him to make the restitution he had resolved on.

“He had just attained his end, when the long strain on his heart and mind made itself felt at last. With the first relaxing of it, his strength gave way. He fell into a low, lingering fever, and was supposed to be past all hope of recovery. He wrote to me from his bed of sickness, told me (what I had often divined) that he had no thought of taking my diamonds on that ill-omened night, that disturbed suddenly by Willis he had caught hastily at the first object that came to hand, and had made his escape in a panic. The immediate need for discharging some of his debts had obliged him to pledge them later, but he did not part with them till he had assured himself that they could be redeemed subsequently. In fact the arrangement which transferred them from his hands was a private one. They had been acquired, or hired rather, by a wealthy American lady, who had entered into a solemn compact to restore them when he had paid up the necessary sum for release. This had been done now.

The diamonds were once more in his possession, and he entreated me, if it were possible, to come and see him on his dying bed, to let him put them himself into my hands, and gain at the same time forgiveness from my own lips.

"That request was one I could not refuse. Often and often have I thought with a pang on the early promise of my poor nephew, of how we were play-fellows together, and what happiness had been mine, while his life lay under such a weighty cloud. Your father, Ellie, was very good about it all, arranged to come with me himself, and this now is the full explanation of our mysterious absence."

"And you saw my cousin?" I inquired.

"I did, my child; but never shall I forget the sadness of that meeting. I would not have known him. He is bowed down as by years. He, whom I met last in the full flush of health and strength, with his handsome face happy and radiant, is an old man now, crushed, careworn. At first I thought that he was, as he believed himself, very near his end; but he rallied afterwards, and only the other day we had a letter from New York. He said in it that he feels wonderfully stronger, and that he is determined, come what may, to embark at once for England, and sue in his own person for forgiveness from his father. He may be here any day now, yet still I dare not mention his name to your uncle. When we returned from America, your father and I both went to him, told him that the

diamonds were restored, that we had seen his son, and feared he would not be long in this world. But he interrupted us with a sudden passion, and warned us at our peril to venture on that subject again. But it may be, it is just possible, Ellie, that this illness has been sent for good. He may be more softened now."

We talked long into the night, and, made earnest and anxious by the confidence which had been reposed in me, I thought of divers plans and projects for winning my uncle to forgiveness.

"If he would only think of him," I said, "remember him as a boy, his heart must open to something of the old tenderness."

"But he will not do that, Ellie. As far as is possible he has put away every token, every memento of him. He burnt or destroyed several smaller pictures and photographs of him, and the large full-length portrait which was painted on a panel at the head of the stairs he shut up in some strange way between two doors, so that if either was opened he would know of it at once by a sudden clangour and ringing of bells."

"But it is free to view now, mother," I interposed ;  
"I saw it to-night."

My mother started.

"Is this so?" she exclaimed. "Oh, if it were some symptom of relenting ! but I scarcely dare to hope it."

I told her then of Fred's rash entrance into the house, and of what had happened, and we both feared

that uncle had forborne to have the doors refastened merely from his stern shrinking from the subject at all. He never went up the back staircase now, and as the front one, from constant habit, was used by all the household, the picture might still remain in the seclusion in which he had long buried it. This probably had been his thought, at least it was the only conclusion we could arrive at when we considered his unchanged implacability with regard to his son.

I slept but little and restlessly that night, and I was relieved when the full daylight came in and smiled a joyous welcome through the unshuttered panes.

As the heavy clouds rolled back from the sky, and let the shining blue appear, an oppression seemed to be lifted from my thoughts. Doubt and darkness, which are insensibly linked with dismalness in nature, flee away before a brightening aspect. We are apprehensive, we know not why or wherefore, but at the first gleam of sunshine the feeling is gone. Hope springs up with the new day, and life begins again with some of the vigour drawn from a freshened world without.

My mother and I breakfasted together in the little parlour, but an air of greater cheerfulness prevailed now. Uncle George was better, even Willis allowed that, and in honour, I suppose, of the amendment, he went to most extravagant lengths in his supply of the board. We had actually an egg each, a whole loaf of

bread on the table, two pats of butter, and, more marvellous than all, an odd piece of brown ware, shaped like a shell, which contained a minimum of moist sugar.

"The 'lump' is out, ma'am," said Willis almost apologetically, as he popped the offering down at my mother's elbow. I wondered when it was *in*, for I had heard before that this sweetener of the "cup that cheers" was a refinement beyond uncle's approval or appreciation.

The repast over, my mother saw the invalid for a few minutes, and found him strong and resolute as ever. His attacks passed off as rapidly as they came, and he was now up, arrayed in his dressing-gown, and seated in his big chair. I was to go up to him and *entertain* him, I was told, and at the prospect I grew nervous at once. To encounter him in his full force, with his glance keen and questioning as ever, was an ordeal more trying even than to minister to him in weakness.

When I entered, the sight of the flaring colouring of his morning garb was alarming in itself. This terrible robe of red, orange, and blue had never been unfolded to my gaze before, and, taken in combination with the general aggressiveness of his air and the sort of angry hue which was always mounting to his temples, it set me in a tremor at once. He had a stick ready to his hand, and he pounded this the moment he caught sight of me, like a cannonade, I suppose, of welcome.



"Is that you, Ellen?" he cried. "Come over, come closer. What are you afraid of?"

I made an impulsive movement of advance, but, tripping in a tatter in the old carpet, I was all but thrown head foremost on his knees. To a gouty subject the greeting was formidable, and uncle drew himself back with a roar. He brought his stick nearly over my head now, and it was my turn to quail.

"What are you at, girl?" he broke out. "Have you no sense, no steadiness? You are all the most awkward set of children. Not one of you is safe to walk across a room."

I retreated a little, as was natural, but this only made matters worse.

"There—there! you'll be over the lamp-stand next," he screamed. "Do you want to break everything?—to have the whole thing down? Just step here; stand still at my elbow. *Could* you do that?"

It was doubtful, I thought. The heroism it demanded was scarcely mine, but I made an effort at response.

"I don't know how it is, your mother hasn't got this tottering way about her," pursued uncle sharply. "She comes in quiet enough."

"Shall I send her to you?" I stammered.

"And run off yourself. That's what you'd like, I believe. You are a most heartless girl, Ellen, utterly heartless."

The reproach was too much.

"I thought you wanted to get rid of me," I said. "I know I can't please you, uncle, but I do my best."

"Then I have a poor idea of your powers, miss. You look at me askance, nearly knock me over with your violence, and stand staring like a scarecrow afterwards, without even asking me how I am."

"I have been wishing to do so," I said. "I was very sorry to hear you were so ill."

"I wasn't quite so bad as you thought," he interposed, with a chuckle. "I suppose you settled I was just off—at the last gasp, eh?"

"Indeed no, uncle. How can you say that?"

"Why, I'm helping you to be honest. I don't want shirking or concealment here.

" 'When a man is old, and has lots of gold,  
Watchers don't wait till his body's cold.' "

He laughed again in giving utterance to this hateful couplet. I could not listen patiently to such sentiments, and already there was a recoil from my position at his chair.

"Now you are off!" he exclaimed. "You are turning and twisting anew. Is it impossible for you to keep quiet?"

"Certainly it is, when you say such unkind, such unfounded things, uncle," was my reply. "You can't expect me to let silence—or stillness rather—give consent."

"Why it's a joke, girl. Did you never hear one

before? Your nerves might be equal to that, I think. I'm better to-day, and you ought to be glad to see it, and not show yourself so cross and testy. Your mother promised you would come and sit with me, and rouse me up a bit, but it's not likely you'll do that with your talk, at all events, whatever you do in deeds."

I saw a cane-bottomed chair near, with rickety legs and rent seat, and began to question the advisability of committing myself to it. Could I hope for more ease on this support, or should I become doubly tremulous?

Uncle caught the glance, and seconded it with a nod.

"Yes, take it," he said. "I don't want to keep you standing, if you can be more lively when seated. Young limbs used to be different in my days. They didn't fail like an old woman's."

With this encouraging invitation, I drew over the chair, but, slight as I was, it gave an ominous creak the moment my weight was brought to bear on it.

"You'll smash something yet," was uncle's comment. "I know you can't rest without it."

"I certainly can't rest in avoiding it," I thought to myself, for I sat in torture, afraid to stir or almost breathe, lest chair and I should come down together.

"Now," said uncle, when he saw me thus critically placed, "now I hope you're comfortable, miss, and will be able to make yourself agreeable. What have

you all been doing at home of late? Mischief, of course—but of what nature?”

“I don’t know, sir,” I returned, “not having entered into it. I don’t take such an interest in boys’ movements as to follow them closely.”

“Oh, they’ve been at something, then. You admit that?” and his eyes sparkled.

“Very probably, uncle; but they are no longer under my care. You will be glad to hear that. I know I am glad to be able to tell it.”

“Why, I thought you were very proud of your post, Miss Ellen? But ‘pride comes before a fall.’ I suppose you had that?”

He was so desperately sharp and shrewd it was dreadful to talk to him, and I dared not even venture on a gesture of dissent.

“George is the only quiet one among you,” he pursued. “Lucy is gentle and pretty, like her mother. But then she cries.”

“Perhaps if you saw more of George you would think less of him,” I exclaimed. “I don’t believe he would suit you at all.”

His insatiable appetite came to mind, and the meagre means for satisfying it in a household like this, and I could scarcely restrain a smile.

“Now, what’s that for?” said uncle. “What are you sniggering about?”

It was, of course, impossible to explain, yet evasion was equally out of the question with those dagger-like

eyes fixed on me. I began to stammer something, but a most fortunate interruption came. There was a footstep in the passage, and it approached the door.

"There is somebody coming, sir," I exclaimed, and gave a hazardous bound of relief.

"And somebody going," he rejoined, as he saw my chair shake.

But I was lucky for once. It was a departure, not a downfall, which was at hand. A tap was heard at the door, and Willis looked in.

"Mr. Wynham has just arrived, sir," he announced. "He would like to step up."

It was the signal for my release, and I was alert in a moment.

"I knew you were off," said my uncle dryly. "Well, good-bye to you, miss."

There is always an awkwardness in taking leave of a gouty person. A shake of the hand is inadmissible, and even a nearer approach is viewed with uneasiness. I could only therefore give him a sort of glance and nod of farewell, which I doubt if he at all appreciated.

"There, there, run off," he ejaculated. "I know you are in a hurry to be gone. You needn't stand grimacing any more."

In this pleasant way the interview ended, and I said to myself, as I flitted down the stairs, that my mother's hopes of me and my assistance might be laid aside at once. If uncle really cared for me at all,

as she imagined, he had such an extraordinary way of showing it that it led only to intimidation, and I became perfectly helpless in his presence.

When I reached the hall I found my mother standing there. She had my hat and jacket in her hand.

"Ellie," she said, "your father has brought the children over for a drive. They are in the carriage outside. But I wish them to return at once, and you had better go with them. Your father will remain with me, and Thomas can come back for us later in the day."

With these words I was hurried away, but not very much against my will. The ordeal of a second visit to Uncle George would have been too much to face at present; the company of the boys even seemed peaceful in comparison.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### FRED'S ANNOUNCEMENT.

"The man that hails you Tom or Jack,  
And proves, by thumping on your back,  
His sense of your great merit,  
Is such a friend that one had need  
Be very much his friend indeed  
To pardon, or to bear it."

COWPER.

ONCE outside the gates of the Manor-House, the rush of life came back in full force. If there was a questionable gloom within, there was light enough in the merry mischievous glances which met me here. The shadow of stillness which lay over the old mansion flitted swiftly away in the presence of four restless urchins. The carriage was full of them, and they seemed to be deeply engaged in the lively avocation of elbowing one another. When I appeared, I was greeted with a sort of "Hail-stone Chorus," for they all gave a "huzza" together; and Dick, in an impulsive leap, turned his pocketful of marbles over seat and steps.

"Nell, back again!" he cried, almost choking me with a clutch. "And as red and hearty as ever. If that doesn't beat everything!"

"And pray, what did you expect?" I said, battling him off. "A ghost—was it?"

"He thought you'd see one, at all events," put in Merylle. "He was drawing her on the black board last night."

"Oh, it's a lady, then?" I rejoined.

"Of course—Uncle George's wife, you know;" and Dick made an expressive face, which left more of the whites of his eyes visible than was at all agreeable.

"Well, you had better all sit down now," I began, with a resumption of authority. "We are to drive home at once."

"Without mother?" gasped George, and a pallor stole into his cheeks.

I shook him into position almost crossly. His want of trust in me was irritating, and I took my revenge for it.

"Yes, without your mother," I said; "and if you don't take care, you will be without your dinner too, which would be something worse to you. I have no idea of your setting up a wail whenever I have the charge of you."

George looked cowed. The threat was a terrible one, and though tears were ready at first, he restrained himself with a great effort.

We were just off, Thomas had given a curl to his



whip, and all was in readiness, when a quick step came behind. Lucy was with me on the back seat, and had sidled so close up, that a free space was left on her side. In a moment it was filled ; some one had sprung into it, and, to my surprise, I found the intruder to be Fred.

"I say, there's room here," he cried. "That will never do. Nature, you know, abhors a vacuum—eh, Nell?"

"Where did you drop from?" I murmured. "You gave me such a start."

"Better than for you to get the start of me. I ran all the way from home by the fields, reckoning to catch you up. Didn't I just shave it close?"

"And what about your studies? Were you not with Mr. Locke to-day?"

"Heyday! she hasn't heard yet!" was the reply. "Who's to tell her? Which of you'll break it?" and he gave Merylle such a nudge, that she fell full upon Dick. The latter could take a shove, however, without taking offence, and his eyes twinkled at Fred's speech.

"What have you to say?" I demanded dryly. "Anything you can tell I am quite equal to hear."

The reward for this speech was a clap on the back.

"Really, Fred, you are intolerable!" I exclaimed. "I hate to be hit that way, and you know it well."

"Poor old Nell!" was the response. "There's a harder blow to come ; but cheer up ; I'll give it as light as I can. I assure you, it took my breath away at first, but I thought of you in a jiffy :

" 'And Pity filled up  
The whole of the cup.' "

"What are you beating the bush about?" I broke in angrily. "I don't believe you have a thing to tell."

"Haven't I just! There was news at the cottage this morning, if nowhere else. Mr. Locke's gone."

"Mr. Locke gone!" I ejaculated.

"There! I knew it would be a shock. I'd have let you down easy, but you wouldn't have it."

I felt my face crimsoning from vexation. Fred on this track was too dreadful. His tongue in motion was worse than his hands. No one could say what run it might take. A stroke on the shoulder was nothing to it.

"Where is he gone to?" I asked coolly—that is, my voice was steady, if my face was red.

"Shall I tell her?" and Fred winked at Merylle.

The latter had her round eyes fixed on me, and the little smile in them irritated me almost beyond endurance. However, I bore it like the rest. It was the best policy.

"Has anybody a scent-bottle first?" pursued Fred solicitously. "Just you look, Merylle."

"Keep your secret to yourselves," I said disdainfully. "It seems to interest and amuse you supremely. I have not the least anxiety to hear it."

"Why, you asked yourself. Now, didn't she, Merylle?" and Fred turned eagerly to his ally. "However, I think it right, in any case, you should know, and I'm the best to break it to you. He's off, Nell. Don't

faint dead away if you can help it. He's off, I say, to marry a charming young lady."

"Indeed!" I ejaculated. "How cruel to keep me in suspense about nothing. I knew that a good while ago."

"You couldn't have known he was gone, for he only left this morning."

"Well, that he was to go. Is it possible none of you were aware he was engaged?"

"Oh, we were not so much in his secrets as you, Miss Nell. We couldn't expect that." And Fred emphasised the statement with a pinch.

I didn't like it, of course, but that his fingers were at work again was a good sign in one way. It pointed to a certain baffled state of his more refined tactics. Teasing was indispensable to him, but when he descended to this lower style of production he became less formidable.

"As for me, I'm adrift again," continued Fred, with an aggrieved air, or the pretence of it, rather. "Just as I'm shooting ahead, I'm pulled up with a curb. Father won't take me up now. He says it's not worth while for a week."

"A week! That's a short honeymoon," I interposed.

"Uncommon short!" and his eyes sparkled, while a brisk appeal to Merylle for an echo sent her head into my lap.

"I wish you would go on the box, Fred!" I ex-

claimed. "There's no room here—for any one, at least, who uses his elbows like you. I really can't bear it."

"Ah, Nell! you're not what you were. Your nerves are shaken, I'm afraid. Many a push you've given and taken before now."

I was half tempted to show him that my powers were unabated still, but a battle in a carriage with excitable urchins on all sides was too much to adventure. It would have been decidedly undignified, if not desperately unsafe. I tried to find some other outlet for their excitement, and to turn the conversation more immediately from myself.

"When did Aunt Rachel leave?" I asked of Merylle. But Dick forestalled her answer.

"This morning!" he cried. "*I* saw her off. I burst a paper bag the last thing in her ear, and didn't she give a leap."

"And a shriek too," added Merylle. "It was worse than the whistle of the engine."

It appeared that they had deposited her at the station on their way to the Manor-House, Willis having sent a message to my father over night, which made him anxious to be with us early at Uncle George's.

Lucy, who had been very quiet up to this point, gave an unexpected start at this moment, followed by a cry.

"What have you done now, Fred?" I demanded. "Could you not even let the little one alone?"

"I never touched her," he declared.

But as the affirmation was accompanied by a sudden seizure of her in his arms I did not put much confidence in it.

"What is the matter with the puss?" he began coaxingly. "Who dared to tease it?"

"I think it was George," said Lucy.

"George!" we all ejaculated, for, whatever he was, he was scarcely aggressive.

"Yes; some one got his hand into my pocket," she pursued, "and pulled out my comfy-bag. I'm sure it was George."

And so we were all. The evidence was conclusive now, and I gave him a good shake. Hardly had I done so than comfits rolled over us in every direction, and George stood convicted at once. When he set up a wail of denial, it seemed only to blacken the offence, and even Fred interfered then.

"Now, George," he began. But at that opening Dick clapped an arm round the culprit.

"Don't howl, old chap," he said; "but speak up, and stick to your own. It wasn't he at all," he added with a caper. "It was I did it—for fun, you know!" and he appeared quite proud of the achievement.

I was relieved to find that we were coming within sight of home now, for terrible as were the children on any ground, this limited scene of action only increased their nimbleness. They surpassed any rational conception or calculation. The closer the

quarters, the wider the scope for their ingenuity in mischief.

Early in the afternoon my father and mother returned, and brought reassuring tidings of Uncle George ; that is, he was as sharp and strong as ever, softened in no way, but ensconced once more in his old attitude of resoluteness.

Fred had holidays now ; but as no one mentioned Mr. Locke, or alluded to his absence, I naturally abstained from questions. Fred was such a tease, he made me tremble "where no fear was." I was more afraid of him than of Aunt Rachel, as regarded the subject-matter of gentlemen, and that was saying a good deal.

A few days later, my father got his morning paper as usual with the letter-bag, and when he had finished the perusal he laid it down on the breakfast-table. I was next to him and took it up, not that I was especially curious about anything, but I generally liked to give a glance at the "Births, Deaths, and Marriages." In the latter column a name attracted me now. It was that of *Locke*, and I grew a little eager at once. Had I known that Fred was peering over my shoulder all the time, I would have been more careful to repress the tokens of excitement. I would scarcely have given such a quick rustle of the paper as I flattened its surface ; nor have let my eye light up with interest. The apt combination of *Locke* and *Truefitt* was the heading of the announcement,

and, as I proceeded to particulars, I all but uttered an exclamation.

This is the substance of what I saw : "By the Rev. Arthur Locke—brother of the bride—Alice, only daughter of the late Robert Locke, Esq., to Edward Truefitt," etc., etc.

"Why, it's his sister that's married!" I cried involuntarily.

At the same moment I felt myself seized from behind. That dreadful Fred had me in a hug.

"Hurrah!" he burst out. "There's a smile at last! The first for three days. She's been as cross as can be—poor old Nell! But no wonder, I felt for her myself."

At this point his oration was cut short by a desperate effort on my part, which sent him spinning backwards, and I heard a pretended crash of his head against the wall.

"Don't get violent, Nell," he murmured. "Even joy must be kept in bounds."

"What are you both about?" interposed my mother, now. "You mustn't be rude, Fred."

"Rude? Why, I was only jubilant. She thought Mr. Locke had gone off to get married."

"*Thought?* You *said* it?" I broke in.

"Did I? I told you he had started to marry a young lady. And hasn't he done it? Who tied the knot?"

"Really, you are too silly," I exclaimed. "Your

jokes may amuse yourself, but no one else. Mr. Locke is engaged, as every one knows, and it did not give me any particular concern whether his wedding-day approached or not."

"Who says he's engaged?" was the reply.

"Why, the rector announced it, when he came here. Aunt Rachel told me so," and I turned carelessly away.

"It was all a cram," said Fred, and made a fresh dive at me by way of affirmation. "He denies it himself, and I suppose that's enough. Who'd mind Aunt Rachel?"

At this instant a happy summons from his father relieved us of Fred's presence, and the subject was dropped. But I must admit that when I found myself soon afterwards alone in the breakfast-room I came back on the origin of it, and taking up the paper once more I cast another glance on the interesting paragraph. Fred's absurdities gave a ludicrous tone to everything, and sentiment could scarcely live in their atmosphere. And yet there was some vein now of indefinable pleasure in my thoughts which was new and puzzling. It was too deep down for him to have penetrated to, and too shadowy yet for even myself to analyse.



## CHAPTER XIV.

### THE YOUNG IDEA.

"O, yet we trust that somehow good  
Will be the final goal of ill."

TENNYSON.

AGAIN the day for my appearance at the village-school had passed over, and again I had forgotten it. But this time I was scarcely to blame. I had been at the Manor-House on that morning, and, full of other thoughts and duties, I could not have attended to this engagement, even had it come to mind. The rector and Mr. Locke had arranged that each lady who undertook the office of visiting and examining the children should have her own day in the week for the purpose, so that in this way there was a regular and continuous inspection of the school.

It was on a Saturday that I had seen the marriage announcement in the paper, and on the following Wednesday I set out a little before twelve o'clock for the school. This was my day for attendance, and I determined to neglect it no longer. It may be sup-

posed that I had no feeling of reluctance to encounter in the matter, having been so confident formerly respecting my assumption of a similar task. But this was not the case. The sense of failure which was associated with my late efforts was a depressing introduction to any new undertaking. The glamour of power and prestige was gone. The harsh reality of the thing remained, claiming courage and exertion, without the fairer features coming to view of pleasure or triumph. Furthermore, though it may not be imagined, I had some shyness to conquer in a proceeding of the kind. With our own wild tribe, of course, I was quite at home in every sense of the word. It was a different affair to meet rows of curious eyes fixed scanningly on my face, and to feel that every blush called up there by nervousness was commented on and criticised. However, I set forth, as I have said, armed with a gossamer veil, and something as unsubstantial, I am afraid, in the way of fortitude. I know the veil went up in a puff of wind just as I was opening the schoolroom door, and I entered with deepening cheeks and a most trying sensation of insecurity.

The schoolmistress, Miss Manning, was so calm and composed I took a dislike to her at once. Superiority is always distasteful. Then, when she made the whole company of scholars rise in a body and drop a curtsy down to the ground, she overwhelmed me entirely. What was I to do in response? At

least I must say something. But my "Good-morning, children," sounded so hoarse and unnatural that I felt my face getting redder and redder. I proceeded nevertheless to business. Mr. Locke had given me a hint to pay especial regard to the Scripture lessons, and I asked therefore to have a class formed for the purpose. But as I was handed to a chair, and saw the urchins with important air, and books in hand, gathering fast and close around me, my heart set off at a gallop, which I would fain have followed with my feet, and made my escape then and there. Desertion, however, at this stage would have been too ignominious, and I nerved myself for a commencement. I thought I had better begin solemnly. ,

"Now, children, I hope you are going to be very good and quiet with me," I said, and essayed a glance round the circle.

The mistress, who was just at my elbow, interposed here.

"I think, madam, you will find them orderly and attentive. Their training is not considered deficient."

The speech headed by the "madam" was enough to overawe me again, and only that I felt annoyance, it would have done so. But ever so little anger is sufficient to put timidity to flight, and this interference worked the effect. I did not want to have a prompter or critic at my side, and I intimated as politely as I could that I was satisfied with the arrangement of the class, and that I would not detain her from her duties

with the rest of the scholars. She did not withdraw, however, for a full minute, and during that time I occupied myself with turning over the leaves of the reading-book I had been proffered and making mental comments on the unpleasantness of a well-regulated mind. I suppose Miss Manning had such, for I heard high accounts of her from all quarters; but I should infinitely have preferred, as a matter of personal taste, a little thoughtful consideration.

At last I was alone—that is, I had a formidable flock of nine facing me, but no one at my back. I plunged boldly into business then, and essayed an examination in the prescribed portion of Scripture. I found the most of the children stupid or stolid, but one or two showed a surprising aptitude for inquisitiveness. They were sharp and prying beyond even what my trying experience might have led me to expect. Soon they had turned the tables upon me. My queries were nowhere. It was they who were the interrogators, and they put me through such a category of queer puzzling questions that I grew helpless with confusion. I saw my mistake in a moment. I should have stayed the “rising” with a firm hand at once. But I had encouraged it so far as to give responses and explanations at first, and now to draw back was to stand convicted of ignorance. Suddenly I shut up the book.

“That will do for to-day,” I said. “Bring me your geography lesson now.”

I felt that I should be safer on a secular subject, where a haphazard answer might be given less culpably, if none better were forthcoming. I ran them through their shires and principal towns with safety, and then, by way of enlivenment, I set them two or three "buried cities" to disinter. They were so hopeless at these that I grew quite elated. I had them well in hand here, and before closing, I left them a few maxims to reflect upon in leisure hours :

"We go astray and err year by year."

"Remember links of the past."

"Learning always opens the mind."

"We hinder by too much advice."

"Eggs are good for omelettes."

"An order being given, I certainly expect attention."

I doubt if Miss Manning quite approved of the proceeding, but really anything which makes children *think*, is more desirable, I should say, than a rigid adherence to the "parrot system." I had just been exercised in a somewhat similar way myself, so my mind was naturally running on this subject. That interesting young lady, Miss Julia Horton, had presented me with the following poem, entitled "A Village Sketch," with the intimation that thirty-six deceased celebrities were buried therein. I was proud of my prowess in bringing them to life, or to light rather, and had entertained others with the puzzle. The lines ran thus :

"Close by a clover field in green arrayed,  
That skirts the moor edged in with pleasant shade,  
An orchard lies, where wake at spring's behest  
The birds their sweet new tones, while trees fair drest  
In blossoms pink and white their scent distil.  
Beyond the lambkins play upon the hill,  
Where later, sweet as sugar, ricks of hay  
The cow perceives and tempted is to stray.  
Old 'Ned,' too, burns to snatch a mouthful sweet,  
And Dick ensures to Tom a jolly treat  
In tumbling 'mongst the grass, till their rude foe  
The farmer comes, who, odd enough, won't know  
Why boys to leapfrog erst were ever drawn—  
Alas! he'll eye them soon, and clear the lawn.

"Where the long rays across the pathway fall  
John's cottage stands—a place well known to all.  
A somewhat crabbed man is John, whose age  
The thoughts of far-past eras must engage.  
Long since he's taken sides with ancient ways,  
And, odd and dry, denies to moderns praise.  
His hens to neat made fowl-pen turn their wing  
When western evening clouds soft stillness bring.  
His dog, as out he yelps defiance loud,  
To scamp belligerent 'mid the school-boy crowd,  
Disturbs the song old smiths across the way  
Hum everlastingly throughout the day.

"The parson puts his pen serenely by,  
He hears within his manse : swift stops to cry,  
'That drone will make me nap—O, peace I crave !'  
Then thinking—'Aye, 'tis folly thus to slave  
And to waste elegance of style on boors  
(John's one who never comes within church doors).  
My words worth much, that me much labour cost,  
Now all erratic to the winds are tost,  
And every line I add is only lost.'"

I did not, of course, attempt to worry the brains of  
the children with this production, since they would

scarcely have understood it in any sense of the word. Even had they been dexterous enough to extricate the names of poets and authors, etc., from their involved position, I doubt if they would have recognised their claim to any special remembrance. The geography practice was simpler, shorter, and more after their "lights," and with this I contented myself and them for the present.

I had just quitted the school-house, which stood within a pretty enclosure of flowers and evergreens, and was going along the walk towards the gate, when the latch of the latter was lifted. At the same instant a gentleman entered. I advanced a step or two, and found myself confronting Mr. Locke. I had thought him from home still, so a little flush of surprise was quite pardonable. As we shook hands, I said :

"Congratulate me, Mr. Locke, on having paid my first visit here. The 'force of habit' which you spoke of may come into play now."

"I hope it was an agreeable one to begin with?" he inquired.

"No, no, I can't say that," was my response. "I found the forms regular, the stillness perfect, the mistress more so——"

"And pray what would you have had, Miss Wynham?" he interposed laughingly; "noise and turbulence?"

"Yes, I think they would be better. I could say or do something then. My voice would not be so alarmingly audible."

"I don't see why you need be afraid of it," said the curate. "For my part, there are so many closed ears in the world, I must confess I find it pleasant to be attended to."

"Oh, if you have matter and manner to trust to, that is a different thing, Mr. Locke. But I am adrift at once. What have I to impart that could enlighten any one? Miss Manning soars far above me. She could put her pupils through their facings far more efficiently than I could."

"Possibly," he smiled. "Still, a lady's presence is an encouragement and incentive to her in her labours, to say nothing of the little ones."

"I don't believe she thought much of me," I said; "though she gave me an unexpected title of dignity. I wish she would not call me 'madam,' Mr. Locke; it makes me feel so old."

"Perhaps she did not know whom she had the honour of addressing. I must tell her it was Miss Wynham." And with these words he was hastening away when I ventured to stop him.

"Ought I not to say something to you, by way of congratulation?" I began. "We saw an announcement in the paper which pointed to some gay festivities in which you have had an active part. We were glad you had such pleasant occasion for your absence."

"Thank you very much," he said. "My sister has been engaged for some time, but all has ended happily now. Her husband has got a good appointment,



and they are to be settled near London. She is my only sister, as you may have noticed, and since our father's death she lived the greater part of the year with me. I am glad she is still to be within reach, for I feared, at one time, she might have to go abroad on her marriage."

"Had I known her, of course I should express more," I added with my final good-bye. "But when another event comes off you will have all our congratulations."

I don't know what made me say this. It is quite true I put no faith in Fred's nonsense, and felt that the rector and Aunt Rachel should be credited before him. At the same time, the words came out unawares, and I was sensible the next instant that they had a tinge of mingled forwardness and inquisitiveness on my lips. When Mr. Locke turned away, with just one quick glance and then a quiet smile, I was overwhelmed with a very proper confusion, and would have given a good deal to have recalled what a mere talkative instinct had led to.

It is a most unfortunate peculiarity of mine that I never throw off stiffness and become easy and expansive, than I have to encounter regret for some inconsiderate saying. If I could only attain the due mean between primness and recklessness, I should look more complacently on myself, whatever others might think of me.

On reaching home, I found my mother on the

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avenue, and she joined me at once. I told her I had been at the school, and she asked me if I had met Mr. Locke. He had just called at the Lodge, she added, to see about Fred, and to say that he should be quite ready to recommence study with him on the following morning.

"Yes, I saw him," I replied, "as I was coming out of the school-house. I mentioned his sister's wedding to him. There was no harm in that, I suppose?"

"No, Ellie. I said a few congratulatory words too."

"But I am afraid I blundered afterwards," I pursued. When anything is on my mind I always like to confess it. "I asked him something about his own engagement."

"That was certainly rather strange on your part. How could you do that?" questioned my mother.

"I don't know what made me," I blurted out, "except that I am silly and stupid. I suppose he would add 'impertinent' too."

"We are but late acquaintances," said my mother quietly; "and as he is a new-comer to the neighbourhood, whose family is quite unknown to us, any inquiries on our part into his personal concerns are certainly uncalled for. I have heard it stated decidedly that he is engaged, but I should never think of probing him on the matter myself."

"Of course you would not. But, then, you have some discretion, mother, which I am afraid your luckless little daughter has not," and I stole my hand within her arm.

"Now, Ellie, you are talking nonsense," she said. "You are quite old enough to have a clear notion of the fitness of things, and I believe you have it too, only you let your tongue sometimes run before your thoughts."

She was so right in this, that my heart gave a quick throb of assent ; and yet, though I could condemn myself, I did not like another to do it. Whenever I made an admission of error I expected somehow to be reassured, not reproved. But we may look for many a thing without either deserving or getting it.

"I suppose you have remembered that your eighteenth birthday comes next month?" pursued my mother presently. "I wish you to have some gratification then that may be associated with it in the future. I leave it to yourself to decide on the kind. We will talk of it again when the time comes nearer."

We were still on the avenue as she spoke, but ere I could answer her, a clatter of hoofs was heard, and Fred, mounted on a black pony, passed a turning in the drive, and almost rode over us in his heedless impetuosity. This pony was a new acquisition ; in fact, it was scarcely his yet. He was to try it, in the first instance, before my father concluded the purchase.

My mother called to him quickly, and he pulled up with the same recklessness, endangering us as much, or rather more, by this backward motion than in his first charge.

"I am afraid that specimen won't do, Fred," said my mother as we saved ourselves with a spring. "I must certainly give my vote against purchase in this case."

Fred was off his steed in a second, one arm thrown over its neck, and another around his mother. His funny, coaxing face was brought close up to hers.

"Now, mother mine, don't say a word," he pleaded. "I never saw you or that witch of a Nell, and the avenue has so many twistings in it, it would take an eel to manage it. Wait till you see me on the open ground!"

"But it is here—where you must pass the oftenest—I should like to judge of your powers," she returned. "You may gallop with safety to yourself on the 'open ground,' as you term it, but, in the meantime, are we all to be ridden over on your road to it?"

"I will go like a mouse," said Fred. "I will creep along, in future, looking and listening at every step, but don't let the governor think I've made a muff of myself. I was a little giddy, but 'Prince' can be managed. It wasn't his fault, at all events."

"If it was yours then, I expect more caution again. Fred, Fred, you are a sad rogue!"

This was added as comment on a closer approach of his merry eyes, and a quick kiss as he released her, and bounded into the saddle again.

"What spirits he has!" murmured my mother. "He reminds me every day more strongly of his poor cousin—of what he *was*, I mean."

"Have you heard anything more of him—of when he may be expected?" I ventured.

"No, Ellie; and it is probable we may not do so till he comes in person. Your uncle George is the same as ever now; I don't know how we are to work upon him."

"He says he likes our George," I began. "Would it be well to bring him over next? I really can't discover in any way his partiality for me."

"I am afraid you have none for him—that is the worst of it," said my mother. "I can scarcely blame you; still if you would try and show less constraint in his presence it would make a great difference with him. Like most people who are feared, he dislikes to have the feeling shown in shrinking or distrust. I believe it to be one deeply-rooted cause of his hardness against his son, that the latter failed in confidence towards him at first. When his confessions of debt and difficulty were made, the plea of fear formed no excuse in the father's eyes for his long concealment."

"But what can he expect, mother?" I asked. "If he puts us in awe of him, we must show it in some way. He claims candour equally with everything else. It is hard to know what to do."

My mother could scarcely dissent from this; yet in her anxious longing to incline me to more ease and friendliness, she would fain have combated the impression, I spared her the effort, however, by a sudden assurance on my part,

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"I will try again," I exclaimed, "and perhaps I may succeed better. I think uncle had still a twinge of the gout the morning I saw him, and I believe that makes everybody terribly cross."

We had reached the house as I spoke, and the children's play-hour being ended, my mother had to go in and resume her duties in the schoolroom. I betook myself to gardening, and was first interrupted in my work by the sound of the luncheon-bell.

## CHAPTER XV.

### MERYLLE'S MYSTERY.

"Flowers are lovely ; Love is flower-like ;  
Friendship is a sheltering tree ;  
O the joys, that came down shower-like,  
Of friendship, love, and liberty,  
Ere I was old !"

COLERIDGE.

A PAUSE seems to come in life at times. The days pass by unnumbered ; we have done nothing to mark them in thought or action, and we let them flit from us like blank leaves lacking the ineffaceable writing which makes time a clear reality to our gaze. It might be imagined that in a household of children this dreamy abstraction could scarcely exist. I suppose, indeed, it would be impossible for any one to fall into it who was brought into constant contact with them. But I was relieved now from that especial strain, and had more leisure to lapse into indolence, or inertness, if disposed thereto.

There had been a certain amount of excitement connected with the visit to Uncle George, and the

disclosure which followed on it. That over, and matters having returned to their ordinary routine again, I missed something at first, and finally was too absent and uninterested to remark anything.

It was in this way that my mother took me quite by surprise when she began one morning :

"Ellie, can you tell me what is wrong with Merylle? She doesn't look well, and there is some trouble over her which I can't make out. She is ready to cry at a word, and, she is generally so merry, the change is all the stranger."

"I?—I did not notice this," I murmured; but Fred, who chanced to overhear us, broke in with another statement.

"Right enough, mother!" he said. "Merylle's gone to pieces like a gimcrack. There'll not be a bit left of her soon. Nell never sees a thing, unless it's her own face in the glass."

"I can see a good deal of rudeness in you," I retorted. "It doesn't require reflection to show that."

"Pray don't begin a strife of words," interposed my mother. "There is some matter really amiss now, I fear. It would be well if you both thought of it instead of running into contention."

"I've thought of it," exclaimed Fred. "I've gone over it in my mind till I feel that I'm wearing down myself. But it's no use. Merylle says nothing, and if she won't tell *me*, it's something awful, you may lay any money."



"I intend to question her," said my mother. "But I beg you won't interfere, Fred. You turn all into a jest, and there is a serious side to life, whatever you may know of it. I believe Merylle is really fretting now, and she is not ill—I can see that—so there must be a hidden cause for regret."

Just as she was speaking, Merylle herself came into the morning-room to look for a book, and my mother called her over to her. She signed to Fred at the same time to go away, but I soon perceived that he had not retreated farther than the outer threshold of the door, and that he held the latter in his hand, while an eye gleamed in through the partial aperture.

My mother was seated near the window, and she took Merylle's hand in hers.

"Is there anything wrong with my little girl?" she began kindly. But at her tone, her mere glance, Merylle collapsed and broke into sobs. "I am afraid there is," pursued my mother, tightening her clasp. "But whatever it may be—trouble of your own making, or of another's—you will tell all to me—to your mother—will you not?"

Merylle, still weeping, gave some answer which was inaudible, and the earnest pleading had to be continued.

"My dear child, you must let me hear what it is," said my mother. "Don't fear to confess. You will be much happier when we know."

It was plain from Merylle's manner that the weight

of the misdeed lay on herself, and that it was the sting of conscience which had been so hard to bear. The questions therefore were put so as to aid her in an admission, but her tears still held her back from speech. I heard the handle of the door give a little squeak just then, and my mother looking up caught Fred's eye.

"I told you to go away," she exclaimed. But before she could continue, he had stolen in and stood on the threshold.

"Do let me stay!" he begged. "I won't put you out. I am really anxious about this, and Merylle knows it. Don't cry so, old girl," he pursued. "No one will be angry. Mother's better than any of us. You're safe to tell her anything."

"Really, Merylle," I interposed now, "these sobs are too much, and every one so kind to you. One would think you had committed murder."

At that word the wail became louder. Whatever chord it touched, the effect was terrible. Merylle flung herself almost on her knees by her mother's lap, and broke into a perfect torrent of tears.

"Good gracious! she's done it!" said Fred.

His face at the moment was too ludicrous. He had thrown up his hands, and the look of absurd horror he put on made me smile despite of myself.

This was the signal for a more grotesque grimace, but he finished himself off then and there. He was ordered peremptorily from the room, and a hint was

given to me to follow. He made no resistance when he saw he was to have company, and scarcely were we outside the door, than he caught me round the waist, and ended a twirl with a span of my arm and a sort of contemptuous pinch.

"You were jealous, Nell!" he murmured, "jealous of my poor, plump Merylle. You are as thin as a whipping-post yourself, and you didn't care how she was pulled down. You took no note of it."

"Don't be so silly, Fred," I returned. "You are never out of scrapes with your nonsense. Mother is really vexed now. This is an odd business altogether. I wonder what Merylle can have done. Do you think it is anything bad?"

He twinkled an eye for all reply, and made some pantomimic gesture expressive of the worst.

"But in earnest, Fred?" I pursued.

"In dead, solemn earnest. What else is over the chit? She's not one to knock up a row about nothing. Merylle was a regular brick. She's tumbled into something terrible; you may take my word for it."

Presently we heard a door open. The conference was over, Merylle had come out, and we caught the sound of her foot running swiftly up the stairs. Fred was alert in a second. He signed to me to remain where I was, and stole off on tip-toe himself towards the morning-room. I was often jealous of his influence and power of persuasion with my mother. He ventured where I would not, and the quiet decision of her

manner, which I found so immovable, was sometimes relaxed in his case.

He was back with me again in a few minutes, and his face was a picture of more comical dismay than ever.

"What is it?" I exclaimed quickly. "What has she done?"

He gave a long, low whistle, but as that reply was not exactly satisfactory, I pressed for more explicitness, and the story came out then. About a week before, "Patty," Dick's favourite white rabbit, had been found dead in the hutch. There were suspicious marks of a dog's teeth in its neck, and Dick, after many questionings and lamentations, had decided that "Bounce," the retriever, was the culprit, and had punished him severely. One of the rails of the hutch had got broken in some way, and he fancied the seizure had been made in this manner. It turned out now that Merylle had the guilt of this catastrophe on her conscience. She had long pined to have possession of the pretty white pet for an hour's play. But Dick had prohibited the pleasure, having heard that it was bad for rabbits to be handled and carried about. Merylle proceeded, therefore, to action on her own account. Finding Dick clear of the premises one afternoon, she took out "Patty," hid her in her apron, and carried her off to the plantation. Here, seated in a favourite nook of hers amongst the trees, she amused herself after her own heart, coaxed and caressed the rabbit, and permitted it little scampers within a boundary guarded closely by an encirclement

of her arms. Suddenly there was a noise, a rush through the underwood, and a strange dog came in sight. With a frightened bound "Patty" escaped from her, and was seized the next instant in the dog's teeth. Merylle rescued it at the risk of a bite to herself, but it was frightened to death, and its gambols were over for that day and for ever. In tears and terror she carried it back to the hutch, but when Dick visited it next his pet was no more. His grief and consternation were so great, that Merylle feared to tell. She avoided any direct questions, which was the more easily done as the marks on the rabbit were conclusive evidence of a dog's work. But when she knew the retriever was punished, and she was invited to attend the funeral of poor "Patty," which Dick conducted with all due honours, her heart smote her severely. Ever since she declared she had been longing to tell, but she was so little suspected, she could never find an opening for confession.

"It wasn't like my Merylle," added Fred. "I never knew her keep a thing on her mind before. But Dick was in such an awful puff, and was so sure 'Bounce' was the criminal, he put none of us properly through our catechism. One good query would have done the work. Merylle would never evade that."

Fred was coming back here upon the instinctive theory he held that a falsehood can be only a spoken one. The system of reticence and evasion evidently commended itself to his conscience as something safe

and harmless. I suppose it was vain for Mr. Locke or any one else to preach to him at present till some influence higher and stronger than ours raised the standard of his views.

To me it has seemed that, shut in as we are by difficulties and enigmas, it is impossible to judge here of the full effect of our words and actions. We cannot take upon ourselves the right of measuring the good or the injury that they do. We have therefore but to follow a true, straight course, knowing that it is the best and surest one. To say that there are deviations from the line of uprightness which may be held venial because they lead to no ill results is to say and see further than we know. We can never tell how a slight equivocation even may work evil for ourselves or others. My dear mother had impressed this feeling upon me early, and in Fred's case I am sure her anxiety was as great for the same end, but his impulses were so quick it was difficult to give any tone other than one of liveliness to them at present. He checked everything with merriment, and with the sad story of the other Fred full in her mind, my mother feared, no doubt, to estrange him from her in the slightest degree. She sought for his confidence before all else, but she felt that it could be only won and held by affection. Aught that weakened that would be fatal to her influence, which must work silently and quietly towards a later formation of his character.

I forgot very often that he was nearly four years my junior, and expected an amount of steadiness in him which his mother was content to wait for.

The only punishment inflicted on Merylle now was that of confession to Dick. My mother insisted on this, and Merylle, having passed through that ordeal, was in such a state of sobs and tears that she could scarcely appear for the rest of the day. She had been fond herself of poor "Patty," and its tragic end, combined with her later concealment, had awoken a real distress in her heart.

Meanwhile, no further tidings had reached my mother of the expected visitor. I had looked out for him daily at first, but when my watchfulness was not rewarded by news or event, I failed to have the object of it so vividly in mind. In fact, Uncle George and all concerning him rather faded from view now in my engrossment with a more personal and particular matter. This was the celebration of my birthday. If my own choice had not been left free, I would doubtless have had various fancies and longings on the subject, but, like everything else, the moment I attained what I wished for the illusion was gone, and it became a source rather of anxiety than amusement. I found it so difficult to decide the kind of festivity I preferred that my brain was in a continual state of puzzle. At one moment I verged towards an early and outdoor celebration, which might possibly yield greater enjoyment for the little ones; and again, the

brilliancy of evening lights and dresses dazzled me, and I thought I should shine more conspicuously in a circle of the kind. At last I had to take Fred into my counsels. This in itself may afford a sample of the state of helplessness I was reduced to. I might have well known the fire of fun and banter I should open out upon myself.

As usual he gave a long whistle at first. Then he eyed me all over, as if I were a natural curiosity, till I felt myself growing red with annoyance.

"Heyday! Nell coming out as a queen!" he exclaimed. "Won't she be a rum one! Will you wear a tinsel crown and perch on a throne—eh, Nell?"

"If you had your way you would make a fool of me, of course," I said. "But I'm thankful to say I'm not in your hands."

"Why, I thought you came to me for help—that you wanted a wrinkle or two?"

"If I were so silly, you soon show me my mistake, Fred. You are no earthly manner of use to any one. My mother has given me leave to do as I like about the amusements, and I imagined you might wish to be taken into consultation. But the more I treat you as a rational being, the more of a tease you become."

"Now, what have I done?" he pleaded. "I'm ready to be your squire, your slave, your lackey, only don't look so terribly cross. You will have your face quite furrowed before the famous night. There's nothing like a smile, Nelly. All will go smooth with it."



To be told of a questionable shade on your brow is scarcely the way to lighten it. However, as I was really in a perplexity I was fain to ignore his remarks, and presently he lent himself to something approaching to seriousness. He put his curly head close to mine, and with a very comical face declared that he was in a brown study, and must be left to it for a minute or two.

"But I don't know how anything bright is to be got out of that," I said.

"I have it!" he exclaimed at the instant. "I have it, Nell. Let it be a charade-party. None of your puppet-dances for me, where every one has the same step and simper, and there's not a bit of honest fun in the lot. It's too late in the autumn to be tripping it outside, but give us something with a good dash about it. I'll come out strong there, I'll promise you."

"It's needless to say that," I laughed. "Once your excitement gets up you will have every one down. Nobody could venture within ten yards of you."

"You're wrong there," he said. "I'm going to be steady as a rock, see if I'm not. I have a word in my eye this minute. It'll take an awful amount of heavy thought to bring it to the front. But it'll do, and I'll do it, I can tell you that much, Nell."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Wait a bit, and you shall hear. I must give it a run in my own mind first. You might be for knocking it over at once."

Having gone so far as to ask advice of him, I found that the fatal step involved another. I was compelled to take it, or to come into more serious collision on the matter than was desirable. Fred, pleased and propitiated, might possibly be a help ; but, in the reverse case, a hindrance is scarcely the word to describe the amount of mischief and mockery that might be looked for.

A charade-party was consequently to be the order of the night, and young people were included in the invitation issued, the hour named for the entertainment being an early one in consequence.

I had divers consultations and inspections now with both Fred and Merylle. We were constantly adding oddities of all kinds to a secret store we had commenced, and we turned out so many old chests and boxes in the lumber-closets upstairs that the floors were literally strewn with ancient finery, and a sort of ghost-like air was diffused around the scene when we set the brocaded skirts on end, and surmounted them with court feathers and wigs.

The dusk had stolen on us one afternoon while amusing ourselves in this way, and finally Merylle and Fred dashed off from me to have a run round the lawn, to get rid of the dust, they said. I did not stay long alone in the somewhat gloomy regions where I was left. I merely waited to fold up some of the more delicate tissues which Fred had been winding turban-like around his head. Then, closing the door

of the lumber-room after me, I began a swift descent of the stairs. I had three flights to run down, and when I had reached the bottom I went at once to the drawing-room, where I had last seen my mother. She was not there now, and while hesitating where to look for her next, I thought I caught a sound of voices in the library. I suppose I turned the handle of the door noiselessly. In any case the occupants of the room did not move, as I glanced in. They were seated in the farther part, where the gathering dusk shrouded objects in a soft mantle both of stillness and indistinctness.

It seemed as if everything must become subdued under the sort of quieting spell which the hour and atmosphere induced. The dreamy weariness of the earth works at moments restfully upon the heart, and the two forms which I gazed upon had yielded to the prevailing influence. They were not speaking. If I had just heard voices, they had ceased now, and look and attitude told of the thought which does not easily find a vent in words.

My pulses had given a throb at the first glance. My mother was here, but her companion was a stranger, a gentleman whom I had never seen before. Though his face was partially averted, I could discover that it was very pale, and that his dark hair was thickly streaked with grey. In that instant of observation I seemed to know and understand all, and without a syllable I reclosed the door and stole swiftly away. It

was my cousin Frederick who had come at last. I felt no doubt of this, and I waited anxiously for some summons from my mother. But an hour passed by, and I heard nothing, and then, growing a little impatient, I went again towards the library. I knocked timidly, but there was no answer, and at that moment I saw my mother in the hall. She had just stepped out of the conservatory, and had on her bonnet and shawl.

"Where are you going?" I exclaimed eagerly.

"Nowhere, Ellie," she returned. "My walk is over for to-day. I have been as far as the end of the avenue, but I am coming in now."

"And the gentleman?" I murmured. "Where is he? You had some one with you in the library."

I suppose my face told what I had guessed, for my mother stopped me gently.

"Yes, Ellie, he has come," she said. "But do not speak of it. The younger ones would talk and question, so that it would be more than embarrassing. I am sure I can trust you, and that you will be careful and considerate."

I gave my assurances quickly, but pursued almost in the same breath :

"But, mother, has he gone now? Will he not stay here with us?"

"He cannot do that," was the reply. "He has returned to London by the evening train. His visit was quite unexpected by me. He walked over from the

station, and I have just accompanied him on his way back as far as the lodge."

"And did no one see him but you, mother?"

"No one on this occasion. Your father has not come in yet from his ride, and of course I would not trouble your cousin with new faces now. He is anxious, indeed, but for one thing—to have an early meeting with his father. At all risks, I must try for that; he cannot rest without it. There is one matter I am half sorry for, Ellie, and that your father is really distressed about."

"What is that?" I interposed.

"That you have heard the whole story. He did not think it right I should tell you, lest it might cause any shadow of embarrassment when your cousin arrived. But I was over-persuaded by your own longings, and by a sort of vague hope that you might do something with your uncle George."

"And perhaps I may," I exclaimed. "I cannot see what harm has been done. If a cousin returned suddenly from abroad, of whom I had never heard, I should naturally have guessed there was some mystery. Knowing what I do, I shall be careful to restrain curiosity and inquiries. I am anxious to see my cousin; but why need there be anything to disconcert us in a meeting? He will never discover from my manner that I know anything, except that he is a new-found relative. My father should have no fears on that account."

As usual, I was quite confident, and my manner re-

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assured my mother in so far that she touched no further on the subject. She began some questions on another matter, and interested herself respecting the preparations which were making for my birthday. Fred and Merylle appeared in a sort of mad race presently. The goal fixed upon was the schoolroom door, and as Merylle was first in entering the hall, Fred made such a desperate dash to overtake her, that he upset nearly everything in his progress. They both seemed to come into collision together at the winning-post. At least the clamour and outcries that arose pointed to the difficulties attendant on a "dead heat." Sober conversation was out of the question in their vicinity, and mine with my mother was speedily interrupted.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### MY BIRTHDAY.

"Nor less I deem that there are powers  
Which of themselves our minds impress ;  
That we can feed this mind of ours  
In a wise passiveness."

WORDSWORTH.

THE house was brilliantly lighted up, and the hall and rooms decorated with flowers. I was arrayed in a pure white dress of transparent texture, looped up with sprays of jessamine ; and as I ran down the staircase to inspect the last arrangements below, I felt a sort of airy elation. The party was mine in a measure, and something of that queenlike sensation was beginning to steal over me which Fred would have overthrown with a jest. It was to be met in another way now. Dick, George, and Lucy had all gathered in the hall, and when they saw me coming down the flight, they sprang forwards with an impulsive greeting.

"Isn't she grand!" cried Dick, and a hand was stretched towards me appreciatingly.

It is an inconvenient fact that the inspection of the eye never seems to satisfy in a case of admiration. Another sense must be brought into play, and a touch or grasp be given before the desired estimate is obtained. Even the most delicate flowers are not spared this scrutiny; nor is it children alone who are led in such fashion to help out their powers of observation. At the same time their seizure is certainly less considerate than that of their elders, and I shrank from it in the present instance with a shriek.

"Don't touch me, Dick!" I implored. "Don't, like a good boy! I am all puffs—only to be looked at."

"All in a puff, at any rate," cried the terrible voice of Fred, and I saw him emerging from the drawing-room. He eyed me from head to foot with his bright twinkling orbs, and I trembled for what might be coming. "Where's your crown, Nell?" he said; "you want some top to all that grandeur."

Impressed with the feeling that my hair was too thick and wavy, and rather overweighted my slight figure, I had added no adornment here.

Dick pressed forward again.

"Yes, yes, Ellie, you should have something on your head," he began. "You have such heaps of things on your dress;" and, by way of emphasis, he made a grasp at a floating tendril of my flowers.

I started back so suddenly that I tripped on the last step of the stairs, and was all but gone. I think I would have preferred the fall to what saved me



from it. It was the quick advance of the whole body of children, and half-a-dozen arms stretched out to my assistance.

"Keep off! keep away!" I cried distractedly; but they were full of active concern, and each vied with the other in coming promptly to the rescue. Even George had a hand out, and as the other clutched something like a plum-bun, my dread of him was excusable.

"Don't attempt it, George!" I exclaimed. "Don't dare to put your fingers on me," and I am afraid he got a slight push at the instant. At all events his features fell into position for a wail, but I am quite sure it was only his sensitiveness could have suffered. Fred recovered him with a little clap on the back.

"I say, you mustn't touch Nell!" he cried. "You mustn't even look at her, George. A glance might ruffle, and that would upset her temper, if not her toilet. Clear back, every one of you. Make a good wide circle, and let us see if she has room enough then."

The response to this mandate left me alone in the middle of the ring, with no means of escape, and under the immediate fire of criticism. The order respecting an ocular survey had not been attended to, as indeed Fred had scarcely intended it should be, and I heard mocking comments on all sides. They were so crushing in some instances that it might have been better to let my garb suffer in this way than my individual self.

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"Dress may have glitter, but the smile within  
Hath beauty that will wear and win."

"She looks a little red," said Fred, "but she may tone down from nervousness. I think I see a quiver already. I am sure I hear a carriage on the avenue."

"It's not time yet," broke in Merylle, who had joined the party. "Mamma is not down, and Ellie has to get her bouquet out of water still. She left it in the greenhouse. You had better let her go, Fred."

"Let her go? Am I holding her? I am holding you all back from her. That's what I have done. She ought to be curtseying her thanks to me for it: a good lancer-like dip. Come, Nell, let us see that before you're off."

I was getting really angry, but it would have been fatal to show the feeling. Fred was of use in one way. He compelled me to good-humour at times as a sort of self-preserved. Fortunately my mother's voice was heard now. She was at the head of the stairs preparing to descend, and I was released to make way for her.

It had been arranged that a little music and a short dance for the young people were to precede the theatrical part of the evening's entertainment, and I went into the drawing-room to look out for some quadrille music, etc., and have it ready on the piano.

While here, some one entered; and, turning round, I saw Mr. Locke. We had not met for a long time, though I had been punctual in the discharge of my

school duties, but I had not chanced to encounter him on these expeditions again. Dick was close behind him, and was so effusive in his greetings, that I felt that the clerical costume carried an enviable distinction about it. It was one really to be trusted to, and the best fitted for a mortal in his perilous passage through the world.

Dick was clinging on to his coat-tails, and making himself otherwise cheerfully demonstrative. I tried to check him, but Mr. Locke encouraged him with a pat.

"Well, my boy, and what is to come off to-night?" he asked. "You are in great spirits, evidently."

"Ellie is to be a queen," exclaimed the little torment. "Fred has it all planned in the play."

"And you are telling it all beforehand," I interrupted. "The performance won't be much, if there's not even the charm of novelty left to it."

"But this is only at the last," persisted Dick; "just a drop-scene."

"I wish it were dropped first as well as last," I exclaimed. "That is—your description of it. Tell your own part, if you wish."

He was to be an imp somewhere in the course of action, and I felt that he would probably distinguish himself.

"I must take care and avoid you, whatever I'm about," was his retort, with a grimace. "She thinks I've crushed her, Mr. Locke, but there's not a hair

turned that I can see," and he danced round my dress with a provoking merriment.

I began to think that the beauties of a new costume were questionable, and that in my case, at all events, there was less pride associated with the latter than mortification. Mr. Locke, however, had something pleasant to say which dissipated vexation.

"What lovely wreaths," he murmured, eyeing my adornments, but not venturing on the hazardous touch; "and natural flowers, too. They are so skilfully arranged I half thought they were artificial."

"Is that a compliment to art at the expense of nature?" I laughed.

"It means only that they are perfect in their position and preservation," he said. "Young ladies tell me that the fairest things are always the frailest, and that they have to call in adventitious aid to 'make them last,' as they term it."

"Right enough, sir," broke in the dreadful voice of Fred. He had entered unperceived, and stolen close behind me. "Now, if Nell had only had sense, she'd have done the same, and we needn't all stand in awe of her. As it is—" and he made a retreating movement expressive of the most absurd apprehension—"as it is, it's not safe to come within twenty yards of her ladyship. I give you all fair warning."

"I think I am a good deal nearer," said Mr. Locke with a smile, "and don't feel myself at all endangered."

"But how about her, or her dress rather?" exclaimed Fred. "That's the point, sir. But there—she's not such a vain old girl after all," he pursued. "She forgot her flowers, her crowning piece of adornment. See what it is to have a brother at hand—a thoughtful one like me. I've brought them to you, Nell," and again he came dancing up to me, one hand, which had been behind his back until now, stretched out with the offering.

My bouquet had not been forgotten. I had left it in a place of freshness for the present, and to see it in his crushing clasp was no pleasant surprise. However I had to accept it with apparent gratitude. To make a fuss again was out of the question. I had suffered enough for my first puff of importance.

Other arrivals were announced now, and I was soon too busy to pay attention to teasing; and Fred, robbed of his vocation, had to make himself rationally agreeable.

Tom and Julia Horton were to take part in the charades; and they, with some other young friends, came early for a little prior consultation. Fred had chosen an effective word to start with, which faintly shadowed forth his ideas of what was desirable. *MENACE* was to be represented as strongly as we could, but we were to wind up with *MASSACRE*, where all his powers might be expected to come into play. I had demurred at first to his choice, but I found it wiser to yield to it, if he was to have any voice in the

matter at all. His mind ran in such a terrible groove that these words were but mild expressions of it, and were preferable to "cutlass," "assassinate," etc., which were proffered next.

I was not to appear in character till the close of the last charade, as I could scarcely absent myself too long from the general circle. This obliged me to allow Fred very much his own way, while it reconciled me in a measure to the excitable nature of his arrangements. At present, my part was to glide gracefully about, look my best, and do my best for the entertainment of the company.

The music and dancing portion of the programme was passed successfully through. Fred, in view of what was coming, restrained himself pretty fairly from bringing his partners to complete grief. There were only two or three slips and downfalls where I had to spring in to the rescue, and nothing more than a hearty laugh was evoked.

The children were all either in a flutter of expectation now respecting the scenic effects that were to follow, or engaged actively in preparations therefor. Thus, for a moment, there was a pause for me, and in the interim of quiet Mr. Locke came up to me. I believe I looked a little anxious and half tired already.

"I am afraid, Miss Wynham, it is more business than pleasure for you to-night," he said. "This seems scarcely considerate. The festival being in your honour, you should have less to do."

"But would that add to the pleasure, Mr. Locke?" I exclaimed. "I thought your opinion would be favourable to the work."

"Not over-work," he rejoined, smiling. "I can guess what the presence of a number of young people must entail."

"Plenty of trouble," I interposed, "but liveliness too; and that gives us a fair proportion of good with the evil, does it not?"

"I believe you are fond of children after all," was his comment. "I know you have been very kind about the school-visiting. I hear from Miss Manning that you are the most regular now in attendance of all our ladies, and the little ones look forward to your appearance amongst them with real pleasure."

"Oh, but they are wonderfully amiable and amenable, Mr. Locke. Too good, as I told you."

"That account says enough in itself," he returned. "It is not every one would give it of a village school."

"But this is an exceptional one," and I gave a little smile. "You know you think that yourself, and I am quite sure Miss Manning does, at all events."

"Yes, she is proud of her flock," he admitted. "But I can take no credit to myself for their management, so you may absolve me from the conceit."

At this moment we heard a sudden noise in the back drawing-room. It was here the charades were to be enacted, and the folding-doors were closed between it

and the apartment in which we were at present awaiting the representation.

"Now Fred has done something!" I ejaculated. "The stage is down, or some of the actors, at any rate. I had better go in and see."

"I think not," said Mr. Locke. "To see might be only provoking, and where your brother is, I should say, help would be uncalled for. He has a way of his own of settling everything, which is prompt and positive."

"I perceive you know him well," I laughed. "But it won't do to let him treat his guests too summarily," and I moved towards the folding-doors. As I approached, they were partially opened, and one of Fred's eyes shone in the aperture. Seeing me, he beckoned frantically, and I flew to him at once. There was a groan as I came behind the scenes, and I found that he had pulled down a curtain and pole on the top of Julia Horton. All these matters had been fixed beforehand, but he would try effects with a reckless impetuosity, and while the young lady was in position for the opening scene, with some fanciful head-gear adjusted, there was a sudden crash, followed by outcries. Julia was buried in ruins, and Fred, in attempting to extricate her, made matters worse by his too strenuous efforts. Fortunately, she was not much hurt, and by dealing with her more delicately, she was brought gradually to light. The worst of it was, she declared she would not act now, and Fred insisted I should take her place. This was



interfering with all our prior arrangements, but what was to be done? The three scenes of the first word were to form a regular little play, and it would be spoiled completely if there were not a young lady on the boards. Merylle had her own *rôle* to carry out as a pert handmaid, and I was the only substitute that could be found. I was vexed at the whole catastrophe, and scarcely knew how I was to fall into position at such short notice. However, the force of necessity carried me through, and the performance was wound up with applause.

I had long looked forward to this night, but I may candidly state that I was immensely relieved when it was safely over. Toil seems inseparable from anything of triumph, and if we seek enjoyment only in our own sensations, and not in a more widely diffused pleasure around us, we are pretty sure to miss it. Fred, however, proclaimed the evening a great success. He had had scope for his works and wildness, and to his heedless head that was enough. That he had smashed two chairs and a vase, hurt Julia Horton's feelings, if not herself, and torn the drawing-room curtains to pieces in the final massacre, were mere matters of pleasurable excitement to look back upon. Dick, too, had come in for his share of mischief and mirth; and as George had both forestalled the supper, and followed it up by a constant state of feasting, the younger ones might be supposed to be satisfied. Lucy had been a little fairy in one scene, and had looked lovely enough to be kissed

all round afterwards ; and if Merylle figured less conspicuously in the general elation, no doubt partial obscurity was good for her.

For myself I felt older in some way after the night was over, and I suppose the sensation was literally correct. Yet that did not make it exactly the more enjoyable. Youth has a charm which we often fail to know or appreciate till it has fled for ever—something faint and delicate as a perfume that steals back upon us in after-time with the memory which is more haunting than the reality. If sorrow is sharp then, hope, at least, is sunny, and there is nothing in the whole range of earthly treasures that can rival this jewel of the heart. Our earliest days, when touched by the light of home-love and happiness, lie in a sort of heaven-lit atmosphere which floats away from the awakened gaze. We turn to them only in dreams ; they live again for us only in the misty region which is reverie, and not life.

“ How beautiful is youth !—How fair its face,  
With its illusions, aspirations, grace,  
Book of beginnings, story without an end,  
Each maid a heroine, and each man a friend.”

It might have been something of presentiment now which induced the gravity of reflection. I had wished to be admitted into the full confidence and consultations of my elders. I had not thought that cares come with such. I had doubted or forgotten that to taste of the tree of knowledge is to look outwards from Eden.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### THE GHOST OF A DINNER.

"Thus, when the lamp that lighted  
The traveller at first goes out,  
He feels awhile benighted  
And looks round in fear and doubt.  
But soon the prospect clearing  
By cloudless starlight on he treads  
And thinks no lamp so cheering  
As that light which Heaven sheds."

MOORE.

"ELLIE, Ellie!"

It was my mother's voice calling me from her room, and I ran up to her hastily. She was standing near the window, with an open letter in her hand. The sheet was written on both sides, and with a glance towards it I recognised the peculiar characters, and knew the penmanship to be that of Uncle George. He always used a jet-black ink and sturdy pen, and the letters seemed to be literally dug into the page. I felt instinctively that something was wrong, and yet it could scarcely be a question of illness, considering the length and legibility of the letter.

"You have heard from Uncle George?" I exclaimed at once. "What does he say, mother? He has not had another attack—has he?"

"No, no," she murmured, "the very contrary. He feels particularly well, he says. This makes him restless, I think—that is, more anxious to see people—and he wishes, or wants, rather——"

She broke off here, and I noticed something strange, almost troubled, in her manner.

"He wants you to go to him?" I interposed.

"Not exactly, Ellie," was her reply. "But you are coming to the point. It is you he asks for."

"For me!" I ejaculated. "But to see him only, I suppose—not to stay there?"

"I am afraid you won't like it—that you can't do it," she said.

"I can go to him some morning, if you wish," I returned. "I have done that before. But surely neither he nor you would expect more?"

"I scarcely do so, Ellie; but he does not consider the loneliness of the Manor-House, or if he does think of it, I suppose it is only to heighten his self-compassion. No one can learn unselfishness that leads the life of a recluse. To live for others is to live with them and amongst them."

I was too panic-stricken to have anything but the one thought. The mournful old mansion rose before me funereal-like in its gloom, and I seemed already shut into its imprisonment. The black figure of

Willis had a dread significance, and the startling calls of my uncle were all but ringing in my ears.

"Oh, mother, I can't do this," I murmured. "You would not ask it if you knew what I should suffer."

"But I am not asking it, Ellie. I am just telling you what your uncle has written about, and desired. To me it seemed a token for good that he should care to have the young about him again. At the same time, I could not urge the visit upon you. I feel that it would be useless, if your own inclinations were strongly against it. As I have always said and thought, it is the confidence of affection he is seeking for. Let him but gain this, and the hardness would be gone. He would repel you no more, as at present. The first impulse that drew you to him would evoke unexpected warmth and kindness."

"But he was always stern, was he not, mother?"

"In manner no doubt he was," she returned; "yet not entirely so at all times, and to every one. To his boy he showed the fulness of affection while the love and trust of youth were still fresh in the child. Later, the unfortunate restrictions about money awoke differences and estrangements. His son was naturally of a most generous, even lavish, disposition, and this accorded but ill with his father's habits."

I was silent for a moment. I was wishing much I could yield a willing compliance. But that was out of the question. Would it be well then to refuse resolutely, or to compel myself to the effort? Already a

premonitory regret arose that the mystery of Uncle George had been so wholly penetrated, that, knowing what I did, my inclinations were no longer free. Any withdrawal on my part must carry with it a silent reproach. My mother might say nothing, but my own heart could not wholly acquit me of culpable shrinking from what might be the path of right and duty.

My mother, noticing my indecision, said kindly :

"I will leave you to think the matter over, Ellie. I need not answer your uncle George until the afternoon. Should you agree to the plan, I would take you over to-morrow myself, and if you remain a night or two, it would be enough as a trial of what you could do, and of what he would wish."

As she said this, she had opened the door of her dressing-room, and was going towards the staircase. It was just the busy hour of the day with her, and she could not well delay longer for consultation.

I followed her, however. I could not rest with this dreadful weight upon my mind. To dwell on it alone seemed to be anticipating the evil. I caught her in a sort of imploring clasp.

"Oh, mother, I don't think I could do it," I murmured.

A sudden clap from behind emphasised the statement. Fred was there, and I felt his seizure on my shoulders. He had heard something already, or guessed it, at all events, for he sprang at once into the subject.

"Not she!" he exclaimed. "She'd never do it. Poor old Nell! she's thin enough as it is. Send her into that house, and she'll come out of it a skeleton."

"What do you know about it, Fred?" interposed my mother almost sternly.

She was vexed at his inopportune appearance, and the interference which as quickly followed.

"I know that Uncle George has written," he pursued. "I saw his crabbed handwriting on a big envelope on the breakfast-table. If it's Nell he wants, I don't think she's equal to it. It takes a good bit of pluck to face that grim old place, I can tell you."

His words were the first things to inspire a sudden resolve. None like to have their courage doubted, and, before Fred at least, the imputation of weakness was not to be tamely accepted.

"I don't know what you mean," I exclaimed. "I should think I've been at the Manor-House before, and stayed a night there too. What *you* could do is another thing, but I have been tried already."

"Isn't she cock-a-hoop!" said Fred. "Quite game, I declare. We'll have her heading a regiment soon."

My mother had too much to do to listen to his nonsense, and we were presently left to ourselves.

Fred's teasing had a wonderfully reviving effect, and when anxiety yielded to annoyance, a complete reaction had set in. The dreamy terrors of the imagination were gone; I was too full of heat and hastiness to give place to a thrill of awe. It was in

this manner that my courage and confidence were got up, and that I began to contemplate the possibility of a visit to the Manor-House.

When I thought the matter over, it was flattering in one way that Uncle George wished for me. He was so exclusive in his views and fancies, that the close admission to his presence could not but mark an especial favour towards myself. I am afraid I did not fully appreciate the feeling, and should have been as pleased that it had not been awakened. At the same time, being there, and inclining him to this unwonted hospitality, it might not be well to check it. I saw that it gratified my mother, while it perplexed her, and my sensations took gradually something of the same tone.

The result of my ruminations was the acceptance of the invitation, and on the following afternoon my mother and I set out in the carriage together.

When we reached our destination, we found uncle in the library in the midst of his fusty books, as usual, and he welcomed us with a grim smile. I felt that he was pleased at my appearance. Nevertheless, a keen, scanning glance, which seemed to shake my very heart within me, was not exactly the greeting I would have desired. However, I bore up beautifully till the parting with my mother came. Then a half tremor seized me, and a sort of desolate sensation, as if I were being deserted and left alone in the world. Despite the watchful eyes of my uncle, I knew that my face told



its tale, and that he must read there the nervous shrinking I would fain have concealed.

When my mother had left, he motioned to me to take a chair near him.

"You look a little pale, Ellen," he said. "Is there anything the matter?"

What was I to say? My answer was to try and draw my seat into the shade, for I felt tears rising in my eyes. I wanted Fred's presence to brace me up. A taunt from him would have been worth more than kindness.

"Were you never away from your mother before?" pursued Uncle George scrutinisingly. "At all events, she has been away from you, and that is much the same thing, isn't it?"

His questions were all so terrible, so sharpened to a point-blank aim, it was impossible to answer them. Truthfulness shrank from the task, and hypocrisy would have been unavailing.

"I am very glad to come to you, uncle," I began, and in that there was a grain of sincerity, for the decision had been my own, and I felt that I was doing right in forming it. "I only wish I could be of some use to you. Would you care for me to read to you, or is there anything else I can do?"

"Not now, not now!" he exclaimed. "I want you to talk, to amuse me. Have you got no news? I suppose you think because I live here alone I am to be forgotten entirely to hear nothing, to know nothing?"

"There is really little to tell, sir," I returned. "We are all very quiet, and, as a rule, pretty busy. We had a party last Thursday for my birthday, but that was quite an event."

"If it was an event, it ought to be worthy of notice, but I suppose I am not worthy of being informed of it—that is the point."

"Indeed, uncle, you mistake me!" I cried. "Now that it is over, I have hardly thought about it, and it was not a very gay affair. We had principally young people."

"How old were you then, Ellen?" he interposed suddenly.

"Eighteen," I said.

"I thought so," he murmured. "I had not forgotten the night, nor the age either, it seems. No doubt you imagined I had. Of course you remarked that I gave you nothing."

"*Nothing* could scarcely be remarked, uncle," I laughed. "I had not a great many presents, and, as I never expect much, they were pleasant surprises."

"What did your aunt Rachel give?" he asked.

"A 'Little Wanzer,' uncle."

"A little what?"

"A sewing-machine. But it is not new, and I can't manage it. There is something wrong, I'm afraid."

"She had smashed it first, in fact?" and he chuckled.

I knew I could not please him better than by allowing this to be thought, and as it was perfectly true,

there was no use in disguising matters. The "Little Wanzer" came to me in an extremely shaky condition, and some attempts of Fred's to set it on its legs again, finished off the wreck of its internal economy.

"You thanked her, I hope?" he inquired, with the gleam still in his eyes.

"Well, yes, I thanked her," I admitted.

"And you really do feel grateful?"

"I suppose she meant it well, uncle. And it might have been of some use if Fred had not taken it to pieces at once."

The name had come out inadvertently, and instantly I saw a shadow on uncle's face. How could he think he had forgotten? how could any one imagine that the past had been buried, when this name alone had such strange and swift power over him?

He turned away from me now, bent over a cabinet at his side, and took something from an inner drawer. The next instant it was in my hands, and he repeated brusquely, almost roughly:

"No thanks, no thanks. I hate them. I want none of them. That may go to pieces like your aunt Rachel's grand offering, and you will be as glad then they were spared you."

I began timidly to unfold a paper which was wrapped around what seemed a box or case, but even here my instinctive actions were arrested.

"Never mind it now," he said. "It's not a dose '*to be taken at once.*' It will keep, if you can keep it, I can tell you."

Thereupon I had to crush the packet surreptitiously into my pocket like some ill-gotten goods which must not be mentioned or displayed. I was curious respecting the contents, for a present from Uncle George was an unexampled thing, calculated to give rather a shock than a pleasurable thrill. Sitting here in the half-twilight with him, the strangest feeling came over me, as if he were a sort of wizard, and I were being brought under the spell of a dubious enchantment. The gloom of the room, the glitter of his small piercing eyes, the mysterious tomes, yellow with dust and age, which were ranged sombrously around us, all heightened the sensation, and drew me from the clearness of reality into a kind of visionary scene. It scarcely seemed new to me. I had surely dreamt of it, if not lived in it, before. It touched on that border-land where consciousness grows dim, and forms fade even into shadows.

His voice aroused me, also a sound in the hall without.

"There's Willis with the dinner," he exclaimed. "You're not hungry, I hope? for I am."

This preamble was not unnecessary to the appearance of an exceedingly small woodcock. It was served correctly, with due sauces and adjuncts, but it was set out alone on a silver dish, and in one opposite there were four Brussels-sprouts, not much bigger than a marble each. Two slices of bread completed the repast, which was carried in complete on a tray, with a

damask cloth underneath, so that Willis had only to place it ready on a little table at uncle's side. Fortunately I had fared heartily at home at luncheon-hour, or the meagre preparations would have been appalling. A heart like George's must have succumbed at once. Uncle helped me to something which I think must have been a bit of the outer skin of the leg, with three grains of shot added as a make-weight.

"You must help out your dinner with vegetables for to-day, Ellen," he said. "I was not sure you would come, so there was no use in laying in stores. You like greens, I hope? As to potatoes, I never have them. They're not good for gouty people."

Was I included in that category? I thought to myself. It would appear so from the aspect of things, and uncle's decision respecting the proper diet to be adopted under the circumstances. No exception evidently was to be made in my case.

I tried to fiddle with my knife and fork, having little else to manipulate, but long before uncle had picked the last shreds of his woodcock I was sitting blankly before a bare plate, thinking vaguely whether game, as it had begun the repast, was to end it too, and how long it would be possible to exist on the mere view of a snipe or woodcock. The dusk, to which we were still left, possibly veiled my position as well as my expression from uncle. At all events he plainly enjoyed his own lion's share of the banquet

without any compunctious twinges, and when he had come to a satisfactory conclusion, he poured himself out a brimming glass of Burgundy.

"Will you try some, Ellen?" he asked, and brought the tall bottle a little nearer to me. I was glad to be able to refuse. I really did not care for wine, and his face beamed so when he saw me turning to the carafe of water, that it struck me an opposite course might have been hazardous.

"I hope you don't care for such poisonous things as puddings or pies?" he demanded next. "If you do, you won't get them here. I've not lived so many years in the world without learning what's safe and wholesome. You all have the toothache nowadays before you've well cut your teeth, and as to complexion, there's as much green to be seen in it often as in the face of nature."

I think the envious shade had stolen into his own remarks, and that if he could have enjoyed a sweet-meat like younger palates he would not have been so severe on its effects. I know in our family he could hardly have seen much of the objectionable hue. With the exception, perhaps, of George, we were all rather ruddy than muddy, and Lucy, at least, had a most peach-like bloom.

But whatever his views were based on, I need not expect to alter them. Taking, as they did, the rigid turn of economy, they were naturally inflexible, and a morsel of Stilton cheese wound up the repast.

Meanwhile, we sat in gloom. The gathering darkness grew weighty without, and within we had only the flicker of a very feeble wood fire to enliven or enlighten us. Uncle's figure in the great easy-chair became shadowy, indistinct. It seemed fading gradually from me, and a silence which had succeeded on his last remarks was for minutes unbroken. All at once his voice startled me again.

"Would you like candles?" he exclaimed. "Do you want to read anything? Of course, if it's only talking or thinking we're at, either can be done as well or better in the dark."

The dismal prospect was too much for me. I must rush at literature as the one mode of escape.

"I would wish very much to look over some of your books, uncle, if you will let me," I said timidly.

"Which of them?" was the quick answer. "I can't let them all be knocked about."

The idea of a general overhauling of his library was rather preposterous. The piles of volumes which were on the floor alone would have taken me days to glance at. Heavy in binding, heavier in matter, and thick with dust, a tolerably powerful leverage must be applied to their displacement.

"I think you have an illustrated 'Shakespeare,' uncle," I ventured. "Might I see that?"

"Boydell?" he inquired. "Well, yes; when the lights come you can go through it carefully, but be cautious how you turn the pages. It has had too

much thumbing in its day, and the leaves show the traces of it in occasional weakness. There are soils too. They say 'Many hands make light work,' but it is my belief 'Many hands make *dark* work.'

He smiled grimly at the jest, and I heard his stick give a little tap of applause. Or could it have been a summons for Willis? In any case, the door opened at the moment, and that individual appeared bearing in his hand a silver candelabra containing three lighted wax candles. My heart gave a bound at the sight, but I don't think uncle's did. He viewed the trebled blaze long and wistfully. The extravagance was Willis's, or it could not have been borne for a second. But, suddenly, the contemplation was too much for him. Human nature could sustain it no longer. He stooped towards the stand, which had been placed close at his side, and blew out one of the lights.

"There is such a flare," he said, "it is quite intolerable. I think Willis wants to blind us both."

I said nothing, for I was sorry to see the illumination diminished. It lent an unexpected cheerfulness to the aspect of things, and even the musty bookshelves stood out more invitingly in the gleam. However we had still two candles, and they were better than one or none. Unluckily that was only my opinion. Uncle was very far from sharing it. I could scarcely repress a little cry when he made another dive and extinguished another of the lights.

"Now, what's wrong?" he demanded. "Is there



anything the matter? You give a start as if there were. You are doing nothing that I can see. What do you want all that blaze in your eyes for?"

"I thought I was to look at the 'Shakespere,'" I began, but I was stopped quickly.

"You are in such a hurry about everything," he said. "There will be time enough by-and-by, when we have got a minute to digest our dinner. Could you not wait till after tea?"

The query reminded me that I was still hungry, whatever he might be, and I looked forward to the advent of the latter refreshment anxiously.

At last it came. Two delicate cups of Sèvres china, a tiny tea-pot, and cream-jug. Nothing else! Not even a wafer-like biscuit, or a shaving of bread and butter. Fred's prophecy rushed on my thoughts, and I began to feel an alarming thinness already. Sleep seemed the only refreshment to fall back upon, and I said "good-night" as early as possible. Uncle did not combat the premature retirement. He saw something of a frugal turn in it, which evidently commended itself to his mind. Before I had well left the room, he had bent forward and extinguished the last of his lights.

Willis had brought me a chamber candlestick, with a morsel of wax end in it not an inch long. The very sight of it quickened my movements to a run when I was outside the library-door. I dreaded being left in darkness before I had time to bury my head

under the bed-clothes where remembrance might be shut out along with the visions. Fortunately, I was given the same room which my mother and I had occupied. I knew something of the localities here, and association brought up what was reassuring rather than affrighting.

As I threw off my dress, I recalled the little parcel in the pocket, and I took it hastily out. The wick of the candle was still manfully fighting for life, and the brightest gleams preceded the close of the struggle. In one of these I undid the paper wrappings of my packet, drew out and unclosed a morocco case, and saw something within which caused me a start of astonishment.

It was the sparkle of an emerald set within an exquisite border of filagree gold. It was to be used evidently as a brooch, but I did not take it out of its satin cushion where it lay softly embedded. I could only gaze at it in perplexity. Was this a gift from my uncle, with his hard grasp and close watchful eyes, which seemed to turn a key upon everything?

Another instant, and glitter and gleam were gone, and I was left alike to darkness and bewilderment.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### STARTLING EVENTS.

"And thus the heart will break, yet brokenly live on."

BYRON.

A CALL in the night is affrighting. The summons has an urgency about it which is answered by a thrill. It may betoken death or danger, and to one who has been wrapped in the soft silent atmosphere of profound sleep, it has a startling significance. The senses are not clear to realise or understand. They feel only the mystery of unknown calamity, and recoil from it with a shudder.

I had been aroused in this wise from the slumber into which I had fallen on the extinction of the light. Some one was knocking at my room door loudly and repeatedly, and I heard my name uttered.

I sprang up at once, ran to the door, and opened it. To my surprise, there was a stream of early daylight without. I had not known I had slept so long, and my chamber was so draped with heavy curtains both around the bed and windows, that it had seemed to

me here to be the dead of night. The housemaid was standing in the passage, and I asked eagerly at once if anything was the matter.

"Willis told me to call you, miss," was the reply. "It's just six o'clock."

"But is my uncle ill? Is there nothing wrong?"

The queries were not unnatural, considering that I had no household duties before me, and I had learned that the breakfast was not to be till ten o'clock.

The woman looked a little mysterious. Then, entering my room with me, she drew back the sombrous hangings, and a cold mournful light was shed upon the scene. No warmth or brightness had arisen yet with the new day. All lay under a sort of motionless spell, dreary, inanimate. I scanned the maid's face as she stood in the window, and guessed that something unusual had occurred.

"What is it, Martha?" I questioned. "What has happened?"

Like Willis, she was a dry uncommunicative person, with whom I never could make any way. Indeed I rarely saw her, as her duties seemed principally to lie in the basement story. She was cook, I believe, as well as housemaid. She eyed me slowly now, as if she had to question, rather than answer, and her words were almost an echo of her former ones.

"Willis wants you, miss. He wants you partikler."

"At this hour?" I exclaimed. "What can he mean? What is he thinking of?"

But Martha turned away as if she had not heard me, and I presently found myself alone. She had glided out of the room. To obey the summons was the only way to set at rest anxiety or curiosity.

I was always pretty rapid about dressing, and it may be imagined that I hurried more than usual on this occasion. In fact I was strangely apprehensive, without guessing in the least at the discovery and disclosures that awaited me. When I was ready, I stole quietly downstairs and went towards the parlour, where my mother and I had breakfasted together. The library I did not dare to approach—indeed, I believe it was safely locked up every night from intrusion.

I had my hand on the parlour door, when I was stopped abruptly. Willis had been watching me from the end of the passage, and he sprang forward to arrest me.

“Not yet, miss,” he exclaimed; “not yet, for one minute.”

I turned to him in surprise. But one look was enough. His lank moody face was drawn out to a preternatural length. Whatever was the matter, it was something dark and significant to him.

He pointed to another door, which I had never seen unclosed before, but which he flung open now to its fullest extent, as if he were about to usher me into a room full of company. What I found inside were very bare walls, and an odour of damp and mouldi-

ness that seemed oppressive almost in this early hour of freshness, when all the senses are quickened to receive more lively impressions.

Whatever use the apartment had been turned to formerly, it was desolate, deserted, at present ; and Willis, with all his stateliness, could not give me even the accommodation of a seat. However, I should most surely not have accepted it, in my eagerness to learn his tidings and rid myself of his presence. My longings, at the same time, did not influence or hurry him in the least. Never very communicative, he seemed to have grown literally dumb now. It was in vain that excitement spoke in my glance, and that I began to question him rapidly, his physiognomy preserved its immovable gloom, and when he spoke at last it was only in response to a dictate of his own, and in nowise to satisfy my interrogations.

"Something is happened, miss," he began ; "I don't know if you 'ave aught to say to it. But it's a drefful bad business, and I wash my 'ands of it."

His tone and air were so lugubrious as he made a motion of throwing off all accountability, that I gave an instinctive start. What had occurred ? Had the house been robbed in the night, and was I accused of the theft ? It appeared to me as if anything might take place in these strange precincts. In an atmosphere like this no preconception could be more alarming than reality.

"You will be good enough to explain yourself,

Willis," I said. "I don't understand this sort of address. I have doubts that you know what you are saying yourself."

His countenance, if it were possible, grew a shade darker at the insinuation.

"Then take your own way of it, miss!" he exclaimed. "I'll neither stay you, nor hinder you. I was for saving yerself a shock. But there's never no thanks for interference. You can just step into the parlour anext ye, and see what ye'll find there."

Curious as I might be, it was scarcely in the nature of things that I could act upon this permission. To turn the handle of a closed door with a warning pointing to what lay behind it, would demand a species of nerves too iron-like to be womanly. At all events, they were not such as I possessed, and I had to descend to entreaties, almost apologies, to Willis to move him to more explicitness. At last I knew all, and I paused in a dreamy, troubled inaction, the weight of a new responsibility almost paralysing my thoughts, placing them, at least, in a strange confusion.

Late on the preceding evening, when I was already in sound sleep, and my uncle, too, had retired to rest, a knock came to the back-door of the Manor-House. An apparent stranger had been admitted, but Willis knew him, even as he stood motionless before him, and for the first time for fourteen years the only son of the house was under his father's roof. Willis confessed to me not alone his perplexity, but his terror. He could

not turn him out, yet to harbour him was worth more than his place to him. Legacy and all might go now. So much it was easy to perceive from his words, though he did not give them quite this candid emphasis. He had granted him, however, neither bed nor board, but had just allowed him access to the parlour, where he had sat during the night.

"But he won't go now, miss," pursued the man. "That's what's so distractin'. I was in with him afore daybreak, but he declares he'll never quit the place till he has seen the master. May be you could say or do summat with him, miss?" and for once in his life Willis's voice took an eager tone, and his face showed even an anxious civility.

"I will see him certainly," I murmured. "But we must think what is best to be done. Oh, how I wish my mother were here! Could we not send for her?"

"There's no way of doing it now, miss," was the reply. "But if Master Fred—the gen'lman I should say—if he'll but leave for the present, we can fix about this afterwards, mayhap."

"But why such haste?" I interposed, scanning his troubled countenance. "My uncle need not know he is here till the meeting is arranged for."

Willis threw up his hands and eyes. "That'll never be, miss. Don't mention it. Don't brathe it in the place. D'ye want to kill the master? Ye don't know the fits he takes. There's something on his heart, they say."



"I would do nothing without my mother, of course," I said. "But till she comes, you will please to do nothing either. My cousin—your young master—must remain."

This was given out with a sudden decision, and I turned at once towards the parlour. Willis's cowardice, his cruelty I may say, had banished my hesitancy. There was something to me inexpressibly mournful in the thought of that lonely watcher in hiding in his father's house, and seeking from the favour of a menial what should have been his by right. There was nervousness still to be encountered in the meeting, but no shrinking from the presence of one who was neglected, unhappy.

That Willis should have applied to me in the emergency surprised me at first, but I thought it probable then that, on the occasion of my last visit, my mother had told him of my own partial discoveries, and her further explanation. He was too much at the bottom of the whole sad secret to be left out of our confidence, and she felt, no doubt, that if I were to do anything towards changing and softening my uncle, it was not only necessary that I should know all, but that Willis should be aware that I did so. As regarded the cousin whom I was now first to see, I determined in my own mind that I would at once show him that I had learnt of some estrangement between him and his father, and of his many years of absence from his home. This would do away with a certain difficulty and embarrass-

ment, which must otherwise interpose between us, and negative any effort at help on my part.

As Willis slowly opened the door of the parlour, I experienced a slight tremor, but it was gone the next instant, and I stood motionless on the threshold. I could only gaze before me with dimmed eyes. A bowed figure was leaning over the little table where my mother and I had sat together. The head had fallen between the arms, nothing of the face was seen, only grey dishevelled hairs as of an old man. No gesture, no movement betrayed the stranger's consciousness of my presence. He seemed sleeping the tired sleep of sorrow, and I could not break in upon it.

Stealing away, I signed to Willis to reclose the door, and I returned with him into the room opposite.

"When does my uncle come down?" I asked. "It cannot be for hours yet."

"About nine o'clock," was the reply. "But you don't know him, miss. I think his feelings tell him things afore another can see 'em. I wouldn't dare to leave *him* there," and he pointed expressively towards the little parlour—"not for no money would I risk it, once master's astir."

"Very well," I said; "I'll risk it."

The assurance was a terrible one. Willis quailed before it. Then he grew angry and authoritative. He regretted already that he had called upon me for interposition, seeing how little I fell in with his views.

However, the step having been taken he could not recall it, and I set myself to keep a kind of watch over the parlour and its lonely occupant. I would not disturb him, and yet I was longing to have the meeting over, to know something of his plans and wishes.

At length I thought I heard a stir within the room, and entering softly I was face to face with my cousin Frederick. He was standing up, looking towards the doorway, and his gaze at once met mine. I felt tears start to my eyes at the moment, but I resolutely restrained them. There is something in a handsome face, when full of sadness, that speaks direct to the heart. We associate happiness with it naturally, and here there was just the slightest impress of it remaining in the sweetness of the glance, in the wan smile of the lips. Despite of worn frame and whitening hairs, a sort of youthful charm lingered in the expression of Frederick Merlin which years had scarcely weakened, which even mental suffering had not wholly effaced.

I knew from Willis that he was aware of my presence in the house, and it was thus no bewilderment but a kind of appealing earnestness that held his looks fastened on mine. At last he moved forward a step and we grasped one another's hands. He had read in my face what I was too slow to express, and he turned to me as a friend.

"Don't say I ought to go," he murmured. "Not without seeing him—without a meeting with my

father. I have waited for this till I can wait no longer. After so many years of absence it seems to me wrong, fatal to delay now. How can anything become easier or better by this course? You have heard—you know of our long estrangement? Can you not feel with me that every minute but widens the gulf till forgiveness is asked and granted?"

That last word had hope in it, but how could I give it to him? Like Willis, I trembled already at the mere thought of my uncle's keen glance, his stern inflexible face. I had but one resource to fall back upon, the help and counsel of my mother. I pleaded with him that we should await this, and promised to send for her as early as possible. The mention of her name was enough. He acquiesced at once, and said he would leave everything trustingly in her hands. I quitted him then to seek for a messenger, and was glad to find Willis preparing a small breakfast-tray to take into the parlour.

At the moment, however, I got a start by hearing Uncle George's bell ring loudly. Willis had impressed me with such a sense of his extraordinary penetration, or presentiments, that I felt as if all must be already discovered. But when I looked at the butler, he only smiled grimly.

"It's the morning for master's Turkish-bath," he said. "He gets up early then, and isn't he just alive after it! He'll walk the house by himself, if he takes the fit of it."

The picture was alarming, but I could not altogether credit it. His activity, however increased, could scarcely carry him so far as to this roving and independent state of movement. The worst of it was that Willis set off at once to attend upon him, and left me without help or hint as to the means of procuring a messenger to Crystal Lodge.

An hour later I was wandering about the garden, anxious and uncertain, when I caught the sound of rapid wheels on the road outside the enclosure. To my surprise they drew up at the gateway. Could it be some one from home? I thought. The high wooden barriers around the place shut out a view of the road, but, in a quick impulse, I slipped back the inner bar of the gate and darted outside.

My face flushed to crimson at the moment. What I saw was Mr. Locke's little tax-cart, and the gentleman seated within it holding the reins. My action seemed to point to the eagerness of welcome, and explanations might only make matters more embarrassing. His manner, however, pleasant as usual, soon put me at my ease.

"You are out early, Miss Wynham," he exclaimed. "But you will say the same for me. I engaged to take a week-day service for a brother clergyman here, who was unexpectedly summoned from home. It is at ten o'clock, so I don't think I am much too soon," and he glanced at his watch. "I was dining at Crystal Lodge last night," he pursued, "and I promised

to execute a little commission on the way, and bring you this parcel from Mrs. Wynham."

He handed me, as he spoke, a small packet, which I guessed at once contained some work materials that had been forgotten, and which my mother had arranged to send over to me the first opportunity.

A strange longing seized me at the instant that I could seek advice and assistance from one who would gladly give them, and whose kindness and consideration could be so fully depended on.

He saw the anxious look in my face, though it was checked the same instant. I determined that even a partial confidence could not be ventured upon, without some other sanction than my own wishes:

"Is there anything I can do for you?" he asked. "Any message I can bring to the Lodge? Do not hesitate to give me trouble, if that is in your thoughts."

"You are very kind," I murmured. "How soon will you be returning, Mr. Locke?"

"In less than an hour," he said. "The service is short. Shall I call again? But, yes, I will do so. You will have time then to remember as much as possible, and I want to prove myself a trusty messenger. I rather pride myself upon being good about small matters. But perhaps I am depreciating your commissions too summarily," and he smiled pleasantly. "They may be of a very weighty character, but I hope in that case you will have no doubts either."

"He little knows how near he is to the truth in

his last remark," I thought to myself as he drove off.

The next minute I heard Willis calling me, and on going into the house I found that uncle was down and awaiting breakfast. I was a bad dissembler, and met him with such evident nervousness that Willis, who was laying down the coffee-pot, gave me an awful look. This increased my difficulties, for I got red at once, and Uncle George fastened his eyes on me.

"What are you fussing and flushing about?" he demanded. "Is there not breakfast enough? Is that what is wrong?"

I hastened to disabuse his mind of this impression, for I could honestly say I was not hungry, and in point of fact the fare was rather more plentiful than I could have expected. There were hot rolls, eggs, and some other accessories of a fairly substantial repast. The unwonted prodigality was due evidently to an inspiration on Willis's part, for uncle viewed the board angrily, and I heard muttered comments ever and again of "Waste! waste!" at each morsel that went into my mouth. I was thinking all the time how I could manage to write a line to my mother to have it ready to give to Mr. Locke as he passed the gateway. My uncle probably would lay claims to my attention, which could not easily be dismissed. If he pinned me down to the morning paper, and wished to be read aloud to, no plea could be put in for release. It was more necessary to please and propitiate him than all

else. Even my mother's arrival could avail little, should she find him in a state of incipient irritation. Most luckily, however, his bath had invigorated him. He showed himself quite equal to a further dive into the columns of the *Times*, and once I saw him enwrapped in its folds I made my escape, and had soon pencilled a hasty line to my mother. I had brought no ink, but I had a small supply of stationery with me, and the note was next enclosed in an envelope and ready for delivery to Mr. Locke. Then I stole again into the garden, listened breathlessly for wheels without, and the first moment I heard them advancing along the road, I was at the little wooden gate ready to open it.

When I appeared with my tiny missive, and Mr. Locke drew up to take it, he turned a very earnest glance on me. He seemed instinctively to divine that something was wrong, and his manner took a different tone under the impression.

"This shall be delivered without delay," he said, placing the letter in his breast pocket. "I will call at Crystal Lodge on my way back. Do not fear but Mrs. Wynham shall have it immediately. You are not looking well," he added suddenly. "I only wish I could give a better account of you at home. I trust nothing has happened? that your uncle is not ill?"

"No, not exactly," I murmured. "But I am a little anxious about him. I have asked my mother to come to me. I hope she will do so."



"I know she will do so," was his reply ; and then, as I bid him a hurried good-bye, I felt that his eyes were fixed upon me still, and it was only when I had turned away that he gave sudden rein to the pony, and drove rapidly from the spot.

I stood for a moment alone in the garden, listening to the retreating sound of the wheels. It was almost in a dream I heard it, such misty trouble lay pressingly upon my heart. The morning was chill, grave even, with a sort of solemn sadness in its still air, its pale horizon, and the withering tints of fallen leaves and flowers.

The sudden reaction, after recent haste and excitement, had caused me a faint bewildered feeling, and I could scarcely wonder at Mr. Locke's questioning gaze. If I might judge by my sensations, there was coldness, if not pallor in my cheeks. Startled so early from sleep, I had not had an instant free from anxiety since, and even now I shrank alike from re-entering the house or deserting the post of watchfulness which was rightfully my place.

My cousin had promised me to wait, but if, drawn by a quick impulse, by the tone of his father's voice, he should be tempted to any rash action, my care might at this very time be missed and needed. While the thought grew pressing, I was roused by a kind of cry.

Then I saw the dark figure of Willis on the hall-door steps. He was waving his arms, beckoning to

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me wildly. My heart stood still, but for a second. In the next I rushed towards the house, and as I gained the threshold, fear met me as a visible presence. I felt and knew that the dreaded crisis had come. It was too late now to avert it.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### THE BURNING OF THE PARCHMENT.

"I stood in the gathering twilight,  
In a gently blowing wind,  
And the house looked half uneasy  
Like one that was left behind.

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Browned and brooded the twilight,  
And sank down through the calm,  
Till it seemed for some human sorrows  
There could not be any balm."

GEORGE MACDONALD.

THERE was a voice in the library, a voice which thrilled me as some sight of agony. It was a man's tone, broken by weeping. The door of the room was partly open, but I could not have passed the threshold had not Willis drawn me almost forcibly onwards. When I entered all grew clouded before me in a mist of terrors. I discerned the figure of Uncle George fallen on the ground, and his son kneeling beside him. From his lips the sharp cry had broken :

"My father! my father! Oh! have I killed my father?"

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If there can be such a thing as atonement by suffering for deeds of sin, surely in that moment he bore the weight of a dread punishment, he won the right to a last forgiveness.

But uncle's form was motionless. Could he no longer hear or hearken? Was it death, in truth, which had come? Impelled by a swift fear, I sprang nearer, but Willis interposed. He pointed almost roughly to the broken-hearted son.

"Take him away!" he exclaimed. "Quick, quick! Don't let him speak or touch him. He is killing him as it is."

The man had seized a bottle from the mantelpiece as he spoke—some restorative, no doubt, used in these attacks—and as he turned towards his master, I caught at my cousin's arm. Willis was right, I felt. If life still lingered, it was not those pleading accents that could recall my uncle to it. He would never open his eyes upon a face he shrank rigidly, resolutely from.

"Send Martha for a doctor," Willis called after me, as I drew the hapless son from the room, and finding the woman in the hall, I despatched her instantly.

Alone with my cousin, I learned in a few words the cause of the catastrophe. He had been left so long to himself that he had grown nervously anxious, and had come out into the passage to look for me. At that very moment Willis was in the library, removing the breakfast things, and the door being fully open,

uncle's quick ear caught the unexpected step. Instantly he grasped his stick, and before the butler could stop him, had got as far as the doorway. One glance here revealed all.

The son had paused to listen for his father's voice, and at the same instant that father was before him. He could not restrain the impulse. Now or never, he felt he must throw himself at his feet ; and he sprang forwards. But the shock had been too much for my uncle. A spasm of the heart came on, and he had fallen to the ground before his son could reach him.

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Days had passed over. It was the dusk of evening, and a low sigh stirred the trees around the Manor-House. They were almost leafless now, and looked gaunt and spectre-like in the half light. Their farewell to summer and brightness had already been said, but they were passing now into the barrenness of winter, into the look of lifelessness which they must wear for long.

I felt inexpressibly mournful. Something seemed to hang over the earth which I could not penetrate, a veil of sorrow that enshrouded it, encompassed it. I who had known hitherto only the rush of a quickening warmth through my veins, was held under the dreamy spell of awe, of foreboding. Who can hope when Nature is darkened, when the face of Love is hidden, and we read only portents in sights and sounds ? Yet the gloom here was but a faint expression of weightier

trouble in life. I had been pacing the gravel walk in front of the Manor-House, and as I paused to gaze on the tall melancholy mansion with its background of evergreens, the still chillness of its aspect sent a shiver to my heart. The Shadow of Death was drawing close to it. It seemed already suspended over the portal, but waiting to fall with the approaching pall of the night.

I had left my mother a watcher by the side of Uncle George in his darkened bed-chamber, where I had sat with her all the day. She had insisted now that I should gain a little refreshment in the open air. But at this hour there was nothing to cheer, there was all to depress, especially when loneliness haunted my footsteps, and deepened the significance of other influences. I could wait no longer. I started from the brooding thoughts which were growing so oppressive, and re-entered the house. As I stole up the staircase, I saw my mother standing on the landing-place above. She pointed towards my uncle's door.

"He is awake now," she said. "Go in and see him, Ellie. He has asked for you."

Since the morning on which he had fallen fainting in the library, he had scarcely spoken. He had been carried to his room then, and the doctor who was called in, though he recovered him for the time, gave no hope of his life. To alleviate the acute pain from which he habitually suffered, my uncle had had recourse, without medical sanction, to a species of vapour

bath. But in his case there was a weakened action of the heart in addition to other ailments, and it was this which rendered the mode of relief hazardous, and had all but proved instantly fatal now. He was perfectly conscious as he lay there motionless and speechless in his dark canopied bed, and my mother often thought it was not altogether the stupor of illness that held him thus, but his stern shrinking from a subject that might otherwise be mentioned, his inflexible recoil from the presence he was resolute to shut out.

If this were so, might I interpret his changed aspect for good now? When I went into the room, his eyes were open, bright with something of their old scrutiny, and fixed themselves eagerly on my face. He had no need any longer to call upon me to advance. I drew closer instinctively. A great pity, if not love, filled my heart for one stricken down so suddenly, whose life had been shut in by the blankness of solitude, the desolation of disappointment. If blame must attach for much of this to himself, if the weight of sadness lay not wholly on misfortune, but on obstinate moroseness, such had not made his fate the easier. Our compassion must be the more deeply stirred for one who has to add self-reproach to the inevitable trials of life. When I remembered his recent gift to me, it pointed to a certain thoughtfulness, and affection even, which my mother had been quick to divine, and which I saw at last glimmering from out the harsh gloom in which he ensconced himself.

He uttered my name now, and looked at me with an appealing earnestness, as if he asked and wanted something.

"What is it, uncle?" I said, and bent over him anxiously.

He did not answer for a full minute, he only scanned my face more penetratingly than ever, till I felt the gaze too fixed to bear, and let my eyes fall under it.

"Are you true?" he murmured then. "True, and to be trusted? Will you do what I ask—instantly, unquestioningly?"

A thought—a hope—sprang to mind. He had relented at last! He would see his son! A quick response came to my lips, and his glance brightened at the words. He raised himself on his pillow, he drew my hand into his for an instant, and released it as suddenly. But he had left a small key in my clasp, and pointing in the direction of a carved cabinet near his bedside, he signed to me eagerly to open it. The key turned at once in the lock, the lid fell back, and several rows of drawers were disclosed.

"A lower one," he exclaimed. "The last but one."

I drew it out and saw two rolls of parchment tied with different-coloured ribbons. One was black, the other red.

"Here! here!" he ejaculated. "Bring them to me here."

His voice had its wonted peremptoriness, the harsh accent of authority that commanded, never pleaded.



I dared not disregard it, and yet I trembled at what I might be about to do. Some of the few words he had spoken since his attack related to the disposition of his money—"My will is made," I had heard him murmur, while my mother and I sat together near his bedside, and then her name was added, followed by mine—"All for you, Eleanor, for you and Ellen."

My mother's distress was shown in her face, but she knew not how to move him. That forgiveness from his only child should be withheld even after death by the cruel blow of disinheritance was a surer mark of his implacability than all else. He had been heard to say, in his first passion, that he would never see him, and that nothing would make him swerve from that vow. But if it were only his adherence to it in the letter that was maintained, he would, at least, prove his pardon by some writing left behind; he would show it unmistakably by naming him his heir.

My uncle read the pained hesitation in my face, and as I approached him he almost snatched the papers from me. He had still a strange even startling strength at intervals, though according to the physician's verdict he had not many hours to live.

He eyed both rolls of parchment feverishly. His mind was as clear as ever, his sight as keen; and though the different colourings of the fastenings evidently marked the enclosures with definite precision, he satisfied himself still further by an inspection of the dates written outside of each roll. There

was an instant of doubt, of struggle in his thoughts. His features were wrought upon by the intensity of emotion, and something of a mist passed across his gaze.

Oh, had his heart turned to that far-away time when a father's love was kindled within it, when all that was happy and hopeful lay before him? Could he pass over a darker interim? Could he, at last, forget—forgive?

Suddenly, with an impulse like a flash, with the rapid movement with which we crush away some object we would look upon no more, he tightened his grasp almost fiercely on one parchment roll. It was that tied with black. The next instant it was thrust into my hands. His eyes gleamed. They had fixed themselves on a bright fire burning just opposite to him in a large old-fashioned grate.

"Take it!" he said to me. "Throw it there!" and his glance showed too plainly where he meant. "Quick! quick, girl!—let me see it in the flames!"

I paused tremblingly. I looked around as for some mode of escape.

"Do you hear?" he repeated wildly. "Have you not promised? Do you dare to disobey?"

That voice was enough. Whatever it claimed of me, I must fulfil. I was pledged, as he said. I sprang forward a step or two, then stopped.

"Oh! uncle!" I exclaimed.

"Burn!—burn!" he broke in, in a sort of agony, and at the words fear fell upon me for what his

emotion might evoke. Like one driven to action by an irresistible force, I reached the fireplace ; my grasp on the packet relaxed ; the next instant it was in the middle of the blaze.

I stood motionless gazing on it, as the red flames curled around the tightened roll, just scorching it at first, blackening it later, and finally leaving nothing but a mass of light filmy substance, ready to be wafted away with the next current of air.

Then I turned to the bed. Uncle's attention had been as strained to watchfulness as my own ; but when the conflagration was accomplished, the destruction of the paper complete, he sank back with a groan. I was at his side eagerly. A swift change had passed into his face.

"Call your mother," he murmured. "Call her, Ellen ; I am dying !"

The tone, the look were enough. The truth of his words was written visibly before me. There was not a second to be lost, and the courage of despair came to me. Death breaks down all barriers. I was afraid no longer. I saw the bowed head of a broken-hearted man, of him who awaited one word of hope in hiding like a criminal. He seemed to be gazing at me imploringly, reproachfully. I could refrain no longer.

"Oh, uncle ! see him ! see him !" I cried, and fell almost on my knees beside him. "See your son ! forgive him before it is too late !"

He made a motion as of denial.

"Oh, don't refuse it!" I besought. "Don't, don't turn away! What is the earth any longer? What is worth anything but peace, pardon? Think of our Saviour's love, His pitiful love, His dying forgiveness."

I had caught his clasp in mine. The tears were raining from my eyes, and they fell in large drops upon his hand. He seemed to give a slight pressure with it at the moment. A cry of thankfulness rose to my lips, and I darted from the bedside.

Assent had been granted at last—I would interpret it as nothing else. I might still be in time, and rushing from the room, I opened a door opposite. Its occupant was standing up, watching, waiting breathlessly for some such summons. I had no need for a word. He obeyed the quick call of my look. It told all—of death, of hope.

Another instant, and the son was by his father's side. But I fell back with a shiver. Something had entered the chamber even in that second of absence. A cold, still presence filled it now; it gave place to none, it would yield to no right, no entreaty of the most anguished heart.

Frederick Merlin stood at last near the parent he had grieved. But no gaze was turned on him, no hand was outstretched to him. The meeting he had pictured so often, the pardon which was to be granted to his penitent appeals partook of a deathly silence.

Nothing might break it. It was icy, unutterable. With a sharp lamentable cry, he flung himself on his father's breast.

"Oh! one word, one look!" he implored. "Oh, do not die, father, till you have forgiven me!"

But never in this world was his woe to be healed. Never was he to know what he had pined and prayed for during long lingering years of remorse. He must look away from earth, if he would gain forgiveness now. There was but One whose loving face would not be hidden from him in his despair. Tears were shed in vain upon the white unconscious face of the dead. He must go with them to Him who "liveth and is alive for evermore," to the Saviour whose heart is always open, who never turns away.

## CHAPTER XX.

### AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

"The spirit-world around this world of sense  
Floats like an atmosphere, and everywhere  
Wafts through these earthly mists and vapours dense  
A vital breath of more ethereal air."

LONGFELLOW.

SOMETHING may come to us when hope has left, when distrust of our wishes, doubt of our own plans have led us not to despair—but to patient reliance on the Higher Power which giveth not for time alone, but for eternity.

The shock caused to my mother by the news of Uncle George's death was followed by deep, sorrowful sympathy for another, for his unhappy son. She blamed herself that she had not sooner attempted a reconciliation between him and his father; that she had forced him to risk it on his own account, and thus lose every chance of a successful issue. Yet no one could have foreseen what ensued. At the very time when she was doing all that she could in sending me on this ill-fated visit to the Manor-House,

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## AN UNEXPECTED VISIT

as his heir. It was drawn up, I remember a year or two after my marriage, and the unfortunate disclosures had come to ledge. Your father was one of the witnesses. And the second will?" I inquired: "what signature, and this makes me recall the fact bequests in it?"

"I knew nothing of it until the other night she returned. Your uncle murmured something about having left everything to me, in reverse end, I did not think at the time he was so near this, was his last testament would be changed. law, whether the earlier would have still shrank is grievous to think he should have produced or not reconciling any paper which contained mention of his name. But beyond this you have, I believe, no other special distress in regard to the burning of parchment."

This conversation with my mother took place early before the funeral. The latter was to open immediately afterwards, and the will was sealed even happiness, with what feelings of than-ness, is difficult to tell. It was the late disclosure came to light then. An unexpected which had been destroyed—the earlier was preserved.



other action interposed, and her plans were unexpectedly baffled.

Frederick Merlin understood this without a word of explanation, and reproaches were the last things to come into his thoughts; but the sight of his deep anguish, his despair almost moved both my mother and myself to regrets which verged well-nigh on self-upbraiding. The destruction of the will haunted me ceaselessly, and followed me even into my restless dreams with a dread significance. That moment when I stood beside the blazing fire, with my uncle's eyes lit up by a feverish gleam fixed so intently on me; when my grasp of the parchment relaxed, and it disappeared amid the flames—that moment was lived again and again in terrors of the imagination. I thought that with that act of mine I had sealed the implacability of the dying man, and had cut off a last hope from his son. That this should have been my part in the sad drama, must cause more than a passing sorrow; its effects could never be reversed now, and however unwilling an agent I had been, the deed must be remembered and lamented. I told my mother all, but at first she was too overwhelmed fully to understand the story, and it was only later that she gave me a degree of comfort. "If there were two wills," she said, "the destruction of the earlier one could not matter, or effect any changes in the wishes expressed in his last attested writing. I suppose he still kept his first will, in which his only son was naturally named

as his heir. It was drawn up, I remember well, about a year or two after my marriage, and before any of the unfortunate disclosures had come to his knowledge. Your father was one of the witnesses of his signature, and this makes me recall the fact."

"And the second will?" I inquired: "what are the bequests in it?"

"I knew nothing of it until the other night, Ellie," she returned. "Your uncle murmured something then about having left everything to me, in reversion for you. I did not think at the time he was so near his end, and hoped all that would be changed. But if this was his last testament it would of course stand in law, whether the earlier could be produced or no. It is grievous to think he should have still shrank from reconciliation, and have shown this feeling by destroying any paper which contained mention of his son's name. But beyond this you have, I believe, no cause for special distress in regard to the burning of the parchment."

This conversation with my mother took place the night before the funeral. The latter was to be at an early hour in the morning, and the will was to be opened immediately afterwards.

It is difficult to tell with what feelings of thankfulness, even happiness, we learnt the contents of the sealed parchment which was left. An unexpected disclosure came to light then. It was the later will which had been destroyed—the earlier was preserved,

and that this was not due to any error or confusion was rendered sufficiently plain by a few pencilled lines which were written outside. My uncle intimated here that he had made a different disposition of his property, but that if he found it possible to forgive even at the latest moment of his life, he would destroy the subsequent document, and preserve this. It was evidently the great struggle in his mind to bring himself to this act of pardon, that I had been a troubled witness of, and had interpreted so differently. While he kept therefore to his sworn words never willingly to see his son in life, he showed that his heart was not altogether so hard and unrelenting as his rash vow had made it appear.

My uncle's possessions were much larger than any one had at all an idea of, and a recent codicil was added to his will, leaving a handsome legacy to my mother, and also a remembrance to me. But nothing brought such grateful emotions to her heart, at least, as the knowledge that her prayers and longings had not been sent forth in vain, and that a forgiveness so unexpected had come to the poor broken-hearted son, who if he had sinned much had sorrowed and suffered long. She wished him to make his home with us for the present, but in his failing state of health it was thought advisable he should go on the Continent as soon as possible, and reside there during the winter months. After the funeral, however, he remained at Crystal Lodge for a week or so, and during this time

we saw a good deal of Mr. Locke. His kindness and attention were unremitting, and without any intrusion into a present grief, or the particulars of that which was bygone, he contrived to impart comfort to the mourner who was so deeply stricken. When we are brought near to death the thoughts turn instinctively to what lies beyond it, and it is in a moment like this that one whose own view is drawn upwards from earth finds it possible to speak to another in less strange accents. Once unseen things gain something of reality for the mind, it is open to think of them, to hear of them; and he, to whom they are already the breath of life and hope, is no longer looked upon as a visionary or enthusiast. He comes to us as a true helpful friend who, happy in faith himself, would lead others into the bright atmosphere of belief.

A trace of latent sensitiveness and reserve influenced the curate in ordinary intercourse, and he could not always bring into prominence what was evidently the leading interest of his own thoughts. Yet it stole out sometimes like a hidden stream, shut out perchance by overhanging banks, but which is there all the time, clear, deep, constant, ready at any moment to let its pure voice be heard by a longing or listening ear.

My mother had known but little of Mr. Locke before this. But now they had many and interesting conversations together, and she gladly continued the arrangement which left Fred under his care and tutelage.

After my cousin Frederick's departure, matters

resumed pretty much their accustomed routine with us. My father was rather more engaged than usual with business affairs regarding the sale of the Manor-House, and other transactions which he undertook in the absence of my cousin, but my mother soon fell into her former round of quiet duties. I was left a good deal to myself, and in the absence of any immediate occupation I felt somewhat lonely—I might almost say melancholy. The excitement of work had died out, also that attendant on the disclosures respecting Uncle George and the return of his son. Now I had nothing to do or think of, but what voluntary plans or wishes claimed of me, and it is needless to say that the tendency to inertness often predominates when there is no apparent object in action. It is more especially so, perhaps, when the physical strength is at a low ebb. I had not passed through the trying scene of a deathbed and the anxieties which had preceded it without some shock to my nerves. I was startled and troubled at first, and even still I could not shake off a sort of bewildered feeling as if I were called upon to aid and act, and was unable to do so. If any one could have roused me up it would have been Fred, who was as mirthful and mischievous as ever. Nothing could depress the elastic spring of his spirits. No doubt or difficulty presented itself more than momentarily to his mind, and thus he was scarcely ever pursued by retrospects or regrets.

One morning I was sitting rather absently in the library, when he broke in on my meditations. I had a book open in my hands which I had just taken down from one of the shelves, but I must confess I was not very deeply engaged in its perusal, so that his sudden action was the more excusable. He shut it up with a clap, and gave me a sort of rousing seizure round the waist at the same time.

"Come, Nell!" he exclaimed, "look alive there! Some one is coming across the lawn with a clerical step, and a weighty air. There's tidings in the wind—I can tell it by the mere flap of his coat-tails."

"I thought you had only just returned from Mr. Locke," I said. "I wonder you did not join company together on the walk, since he follows you so soon."

"Mr. Locke!" he ejaculated, and broke into a loud, irritating laugh. "Did I say it was he?"

"Who else?" I cried, and tried not to show annoyance in a blush.

"Then he's the only parson in the world—the only one for you, at all events, Nell?"

"You talk such folly," I stammered. "He is the clergyman who comes here oftenest, and the one, therefore, the most likely to be expected. You know that as well as I do, Fred."

"Well, yes," he rejoined, with another provoking glance; "he is most attentive—I admit all that. Still, Nell, you might, by a great stretch of imagination, conjure up somebody else."

"I wish I could, by a slight stretch of authority, get rid of you and your nonsense," I exclaimed. "You are growing a greater tease than ever."

"Certainly a 'greater,'" said Fred, drawing himself to his full height. "I have shot up considerably, and developed correspondingly within the last month or two. Every one notices it."

"I wonder you are not ashamed to draw attention to the fact, considering how extremely childish you are still," was my retort.

"In what way, Nell?"

"In every respect."

"But a child is amenable. I thought you made some complaint of me on that head?"

A loud ring at the hall-door prevented the possibility of reply.

"I told you so!" cried Fred, and inflicted a terrible pinch, by way of bringing me to a sense of his accuracy and acuteness.

I had not contested either, so I revenged myself by a push.

"You had better fly and open the door, since you are so eager!" I exclaimed. "An arrival seems an event to you. I am not so easily excited."

"Yet you are crimson this minute, Nell—yes, positively purple," he reiterated. "I do believe you still think it is Mr. Locke."

I began to wish my push had been more violent, and had propelled him entirely out of my presence.

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However, he disappeared pretty quickly as it was, and I was left a moment of peace.

I stole a furtive glance in the mirror over the mantelpiece, and discovering that my cheeks were by no means in the feverish state that Fred had announced, I prepared myself for an appearance in the drawing-room. Visitors were not very frequent at this early hour, and as he had declared the gentleman was not Mr. Locke, I was just in the slightest measure curious as I turned the handle of the door.



## CHAPTER XXI.

### MANY-COLOURED LIFE.

"Then gently scan your brother man,  
Still gentler, sister woman ;  
Though they may gang a kennin' wrang,  
To step aside is human."

BURNS.

WHEN I entered the drawing-room, my mother was there, also Fred, who was in an attitude, so to speak, and, the instant he saw me, proceeded to an expressive gesture with the back of his hand, as if he would prepare me for the worst. His action, however, failed to impress me very alarmingly now. I saw the desire of teasing behind it, but nothing of graver import. If I were to be worked into a panic every time his look and motions induced it, I should be in a state of ceaseless agitation. Our rector, Mr. Horton, was the visitor on the present occasion, and there was little in his quiet air and well-balanced frame to connect him with exciting intelligence.

At the same time, there was undoubtedly a trace of unwonted eagerness in the manner in which his chair

was drawn close to my mother's, and but for Fred's absurd antics I might have supposed he really had news to impart. His back was turned towards me when I entered, but as I came more into the foreground, he rose and gave me a hearty grasp of the hand. He was one of those gentlemen who incline easily towards so much friendliness, but are not particularly mindful of you in other respects. While he held your hand he was heartiness itself, but with a greeting of the kind, any further attention seemed to be dispensed with, at all events as regarded the claims of young people. He was slightly pompous, and had generally an air of business and authority about him which condescended greatly in bestowing so much notice on minor mortals. For my part, a conversation with him would have been too awful to contemplate, and utterly impossible to compass, so it was with real thankfulness I fell in with his views of politeness, and escaped thus easily from his scrutiny.

To my mother he was plainly disposed to be communicative now, and Fred was listening with all his ears.

"You must excuse an early call, my dear Mrs. Wynham," he began. "But I have an engagement for the afternoon, and I was anxious to be the first to convey the present intelligence to you."

At these words Fred, who had crept close to me unseen, gave me such a pinch on the arm that I almost screamed. My mother glanced over at him, and he drew himself up grave as a judge. The rector was,

fortunately, a little deaf, and too much impressed with a sense of his own dignity to realise the possibility of offence to it. He continued, therefore, with calm importance.

"This affair, of course, affects me primarily, but it has influence, too, upon your views and arrangements. Mr. Wynham will like to know of it at once. I have, therefore, thought it well not to delay the communication."

I could have wished that his deeds were as good as his words, for it appeared to me he was delaying considerably over it. However, a query of my mother's brought him at last to the point.

"Do I understand you to speak of anything in connection with Mr. Locke?" she asked. "Will he be unable to continue the tuition with Fred?"

"My dear Mrs. Wynham, you are penetration itself. Your mother's heart sees the point at once," and Mr. Horton gave a sort of solemn fold to his hands. "Mr. Locke is to leave us. He deserts a double post in the parish—ministerial and educational. I need scarcely say that it is a blow to me, for it is difficult in these days of doubts and diversities of thought to find any one of sufficient gravity to maintain a proper balance. It is impossible to know what flights these new-fledged parsons may take, and, for a curate, one is obliged generally to fall back upon the recruiting ranks. I was most singularly fortunate about Mr. Locke. He was seven years in the diocese before he came to me, as-

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sistant curate to a brother clergyman who is one of my oldest friends. I had no risk to run in his case."

"I am very sorry for all our sakes to lose him," interposed my mother. "But I hope the move leads to promotion for him."

"Certainly it does," said Mr. Horton decisively, "or I scarcely think he would leave me. He has been presented to an uncommonly nice living about twenty miles from this. I know the place well. Poor old Grimshaw held it for years."

Fred, who had in some way scented out something of this news already, could restrain himself no longer.

"I suppose he will get married now, sir?" he broke out eagerly.

Mr. Horton bent his eyes rather keenly on him at the query. Then his face relaxed into a smile.

"Eh, my young gentleman, is that your idea of settling in life?" he exclaimed. "Your one view of promotion?"

"I thought it was Mr. Locke's, at all events," said Fred unblushingly. "We heard he was engaged."

"Very probably," returned the rector quietly. "I have noticed a certain abstraction about him of late which would favour the supposition."

"But the report started with you, sir," pursued Fred. "At least we understood so. I never quite believed it."

Mr. Horton eyed him again, and my mother showed some uneasiness for his audacity.

"The report emanated from me?" murmured the gentleman. "Impossible! I never knew anything of the matter, and I most certainly never spoke of it. Who could have said such a thing?"

"My aunt Rachel," said Fred boldly. "It was she who told it here."

"Fred, Fred, you should not talk so much," interposed my mother hastily. "You overhear a word spoken, and perhaps take it up quite erroneously."

"I didn't—that is what aunt must have done," he began.

"Miss Wynham is a most superior lady," said the rector solemnly. He liked Aunt Rachel. She paid him a certain deference which accorded with his tastes, and it rather grated on his feelings to find a personage of her dignity under the criticism of a boy. "I see how the mistake must have arisen," he pursued, after an instant's pause. "Miss Wynham was here when Mr. Locke arrived first, and in speaking about his leaving his former post, some question was asked as to the cause. I said it was owing to a protracted engagement which made his position there rather difficult. And so it was; but it was his sister's engagement I alluded to. She and the rector's eldest son, who was curate also to his father, had formed a mutual attachment; but there seemed no prospect of anything further, the means for a settlement being wanting on both sides, and Mr. Locke felt that it was wiser under these circumstances to make a move else-

where. His sister lived with him then, but lately, as you have heard, the marriage came off, as the gentleman got a good appointment near London."

Fred gave one of his long whistles.

"So that was it!" he murmured. "I knew Aunt Rachel put her foot in it."

"Fred!" exclaimed my mother again, and tried by a reproving look to check him. But I don't think there was any one he stood in awe of, and the rector's grave figure and sedate tones had no other effect than to make him almost quicker in his own impulses.

"I said it from the first," he pursued. "I told Nellie so. He wasn't a bit like a fellow tied down—far too jolly, too——"

"Mr. Horton, will you come and see our conservatories?" said my mother, despairing of arresting this foolish flow of talk, except by an utter disregard to it. "The camellias are just out, and I know you are an admirer of them."

The invitation was accepted, and as the gentleman and my mother moved off together, Fred stole beside me.

"Now, old girl," he began, "who was right? Isn't Aunt Rachel a duffer?"

"But what difference *can* it make to you?" I interposed. "Really, Fred, you are growing too silly."

"Too wise, you mean. I see more than you know, perhaps. There's nothing like being sharp."

"Certainly not, if you want to be disliked. I am

sure Mr. Horton can have no fancy for you. He came to talk to my mother, not to you, and] you broke in everywhere in the rudest way."

"Oh, come, that's too good," he exclaimed. "What is there rude in asking a question, and getting an answer? I'm not going to be lectured on my manners by you, Miss Nell, not till you can steady your own tones in company, and look less like a turkey-cock when any one addresses you."

As usual, I might expect to get the worst of it in a contest with Fred, and I left him then and there, and went back to my book in the library. My father came in from riding presently, and at luncheon the intended departure of Mr. Locke was announced to him.

"When does he leave?" he asked. "What is to be done with you, then, Master Fred?"

"Won't you take me in hand yourself, sir?" said Fred anxiously.

He had too much liberty at home, with his pony and various other indulgences, to view the prospect of school complacently.

My father smiled.

"You want too easy lines," he replied. "I have not time to keep you half hard enough at work, nor indeed, I think, had Mr. Locke either. You need discipline as much as instruction."

Fred looked a little subdued, and I was glad to see that for once something of thoughtfulness stole into his countenance.

"Mr. Locke remains here a couple of months still," said my mother in answer to my father's first question. "That will give us time to think and consider what is best. Mr. Horton very kindly came over this morning to let us know that the change is to be. He has to look out himself for another curate at once, and seems rather anxious about the matter. It will not be easy, indeed, to find a substitute for Mr. Locke. I believe he is liked by every one."

"I'm right sorry he is going," broke out Fred. "There's not a bit of humbug in him, and if he is strict even, one doesn't mind it somehow. He has a kind look all the while. He is only determined—never cross."

Fred's testimony was borne heartily to the merits of his tutor. He and Mr. Locke had become fast friends, and, independent of his loss of him as an instructor, I knew he would miss him often on the pleasant walks and fishing excursions which they took together.

This news, however, and the discussions consequent on it, lost something in freshness and interest by the still more unexpected tidings which reached us presently.

A few mornings later the surprise came. My father, after the perusal of one of his letters at the breakfast-table, threw it down excitedly and pushed back his chair with vehemence.

"Eleanor, you'll never believe it!" he cried. "I can't credit it myself."



"What is it?" exclaimed my mother. "There is nothing wrong, I hope, Richard?"

"I don't know—I really can't say. It may be all right—but I shouldn't have judged it so," and the discarded letter was caught up suddenly, and passed across the table. "Read that," pursued my father, "and see what you think. The particulars I have not gone into. The news in itself was enough. Rachel is going to be married."

Fred gave a bound from his seat, and as Dick was next to him, he sent him spinning from his stool with his impetuous action. To disturb one of the juvenile circle was to upset all. I remembered that to my cost, and was glad to find that it was not only under my rule that disasters occurred. Dick, to save himself, caught at George's sleeve, and another downfall seemed imminent. If George could have relaxed his hold of either mug or bread and butter, the catastrophe would have been lessened. But that would have been to ask too much of human nature. He clung to these through all. It mattered comparatively little to him that a stream of his hot cocoa was sent adown Merylle's neck, that his sticky slice was smeared over my shoulder, as his other hand made a wild grasp at it for arrest. He kept mug and bread to the last, and arose from a struggling contest on the ground with Dick minus beverage and butter, but not otherwise despoiled.

"George is intolerable," I exclaimed. "I put on a

fresh collarette this morning, and sooner than let go his dreadful hunch, he rubs it all over me."

But my charge was unheard amid the outcries from Merylle. She had jumped up to shake herself, but the process only gave her renewed shocks from the hot stream which she had set more fully in motion.

Dick was the only one who had escaped injury, owing to his india-rubber properties. He was soon on foot, and he made a dart at once towards my mother.

"Do tell us!" he cried. "Tell us all, mother. Will Aunt Rachel be a bride like Katie Maynard? But she could never be that. It's all humbug. She couldn't be married."

He had a vision before his eyes of a very young and pretty girl in her floating wreath and veil, whose wedding we had gone to see a few days previously.

"I wish, Richard, you had not spoken before the children," said my mother, trying to keep her countenance.

"What does it matter?" said my father rather gruffly. "Rachel is quite determined. Sooner or later they must have known."

It might as well have been the "later," I thought to myself, but my mother, always gentle, said nothing. After all, except to the eyes of the children, there was nothing so very impossible or preposterous in the contemplated step. Aunt Rachel was still between forty and fifty, and though to a girl in her teens that

age seemed far away in a terrible old-maidenhood, doubtless she viewed her years in a more favourable light herself. The point I found which had evoked my father's irritation, regarded the object of her choice. The gentleman was a foreigner—an adventurer, he put it—some connection of her recent bosom friend, the Countess Graukopf.

"I wish she had never met that woman!" he exclaimed angrily. "I knew no good would come of it. Rachel is so easily humbugged."

"Not she," cried Dick, who had caught up the word. "She kept us fearful tight, father, while you were away. She was worse than Ellie."

"Thank you very much, Dick, for your pleasant mention of me," I said. "I did not expect such flattery."

Meanwhile Fred, who had been the first in commotion, was trying to peer over my mother's shoulder as she perused the epistle. Suddenly he gave a jump, and, as usual, I was the one to bear the first shock of his excitement. He made a rush at me, and caught me round the neck till the damaged collarette was ruffled beyond remedy.

"She's to be married in St. George's—St. George's, Hanover Square! Think of that, Nell!" and he almost choked me with his emphasis. "She has got a count, a reigning duke—a prince, I believe! There's no saying what he may turn into before the day. I wonder the affair's not to come off in St. James's."

"Fred, sit down," said my mother quickly. "You had no right to be looking over me, to read what was not intended for you."

"But isn't it a lark?" he cried. My father had left the room, and he could restrain himself no longer. "Who'd give up now? Poor dear Nell! She's growing as old as the hills. But I wouldn't throw even her overboard yet."

"You will throw something else over, if you don't take care," broke in my mother.

George was almost gone again, and as his mug had just been replenished by her up to the brim, a second downfall would have been too much, even for her patience.

Dick was still afoot, and seemed to be revolving possibilities in his mind with arithmetical exactitude.

"If she goes off with a husband, she can come here no more—isn't that so?" he demanded. "She won't be an old maid, at all events; and it was that made her cross, wasn't it, mother?"

"Go and finish your breakfast, Dick," said the latter, not knowing how else to satisfy him.

"I hope she will ask us all to the wedding," began Merylle, "and then I shall have to get a new hat. Do you think she will, Ellie? I would like it of white chip, with corn-flowers."

"Will there be a big plum-cake?" put in George.

It was the first word he had uttered, but the well-weighed query spoke volumes as to his cogitations.

My mother tried to arrest inquisitiveness. But the tide had been set going, and with six chattering tongues around her, it was not so easy to stem it. For my part, though I was both curious and excited, I was not given much opening for speech at present, amidst the more noisy ebullitions of the others.

I learnt later that my father was greatly vexed with Aunt Rachel. She had been so reticent as regarded her recent movements, that no intimation of the eventful step in her life had reached him till it was quite decided on, and the very day settled for the marriage. This naturally produced something of estrangement between them, and he refused to be present at the ceremony. He took a run up to London, however, to see her beforehand, and my mother accompanied him.

They bade farewell to her then, for immediately after the wedding, Aunt Rachel went over to Germany with her husband—to reside in his principality, as Fred said ; to squander her money, as my father thought.

However that might be, she was no longer our maiden aunt, with spare time and energy on hand to take charge of a full household of nephews and nieces. That memorable visit of hers to Crystal Lodge had been her last, and the days of her rule or influence there were ended for ever.

## CHAPTER XXII.

### SPRING FLOWERS.

"Life's withered leaves grow green again,  
And fresh with childhood's spring,  
As I am welcomed back once more  
Within its rainbow ring

"And by these holy yearnings, by  
These eyes with sweet tears wet,  
I know there wells a spring of love  
Through all my being yet."

GERALD MASSEY.

A FIELD of cowslips, touched by an early dew, framed in by umbrageous hedgerows, and lying under the blue of a cloudless sky—such seems to have the very breath of youth about it. It draws the happy children by its golden loveliness, by its sweet, joyous atmosphere. Their eyes see another world than the worn, working one without. Here everything is fresh, fragrant, pointing to a sort of unending sunlight, a long holiday in life. Flowers are gathered freely, steps are buoyant, and laughter ringing: every sound is but of

merriment, the song of birds, or the low, pleasant hum of insects amid the waving grasses.

A beautiful spring day saw the four little ones of our party in a scene of such like enjoyment. Lessons had been suspended in honour of Merylle's birthday, and full liberty was conceded to them to indulge in games or rambles till the bell summoned them to their early dinner. They set out immediately after breakfast, and a couple of hours later I strolled in the direction I had seen them take, and came upon them in their rural delights. Merylle was seated on a mossy stone near the hawthorn hedge, weaving a monstrous ball for dear little Lucy ; and Dick and George scampered hither and thither in eager rivalry, vieing with each other in their choice of the freshest and fullest blossoms of the fragrant cowslip, and in the rapidity with which they were poured into their sister's lap.

Leaning on the wooden gate that gave access to the lawn, I looked at them with a sort of longing intentness. It was difficult to repress a feeling of envy almost for their light-heartedness. Mine appeared in a measure to have gone, and it is the one thing which may not be constrained, which no effort of will or desire can summon back to us again.

Several weeks had passed by, and it was now the fair month of May, when everything in nature springs into quicker life, and a rush of joy is the natural impulse of the youthful heart. But Fred's words seemed to be coming true. I might have been "as old as the

hills," so dreamy, rather than buoyant, were my sensations, so lost in a far-away mist was the time when childish hopes were all that I knew, when the day was too short for the innocent pleasures that had to be crowded into it.

It must have been sadness, surely—whether allowed or understood—that brought up tears to my eyes as I stood and gazed, while the lines rushed instinctively on my mind :

“There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,  
The earth and every common sight,  
To me did seem  
Apparelled in celestial light,  
The glory and the freshness of a dream,  
It is not now as it has been of yore ;—  
Turn wheresoe’er I may,  
By night or day,  
The things which I have seen I now can see no more !”

Can it be that as we pass onwards we lose in trust what we gain in thought ? Or is it that mournfulness steals over the heart, unconsciously and inevitably, like the fading blight that is sent to some strong young frame while health and ardour are prolonged elsewhere ? Life certainly has not the same outward look for all. On some it opens dazzling skies, softest airs, flowers of light. For others, there are the chills of disappointment, passing hopes, lost joys. The earth has a veil on her loveliness, the clouds will not part in a shining rift to the eyes. The very capacity for happiness, the intense yearning for its blissful



atmosphere, would seem to form the very conditions for its withdrawal. Like love, it is won often by those who scarcely feel it, who poorly prize it. They to whom it would be "all in all" see it afar off, revealed like some celestial vision to the spirit only, inaccessible to the touch.

I know not wherefore these thoughts should have pressed upon my heart amid the spring sunshine, and with a fair beauteous smile shining full upon the face of nature; but perhaps if I would, I could have traced them to the effects of a recent parting.

There is something in friendship too dear to be easily surrendered, and whatever may be thought or said about its life and lastingness in absence, I could not but feel that as the pleasure of intercourse is lost, much must go with it. The time had arrived for Mr. Locke's departure to his new sphere of duty, and on this very morning he had come over to bid us good-bye.

His visit had been a prolonged one, and he seemed to have a difficulty in saying a final adieu. But as he addressed himself more to others than to me, and I had chanced to meet him on the doorstep when he arrived, ready dressed for my walk, I had at last taken leave of him. I thought he might wish to have a talk about Fred, in whom he felt a deep interest, and I left him alone in the drawing-room with my mother. My father had already gone into the library to write letters for the post, and my withdrawal appeared to follow naturally upon his.

I believe change is welcomed by most young people, invested as it is with the delights of the unknown. But these lie chiefly in imagination, and I had learned to distrust them.

To me the thoughts of the new curate, who was to replace the one we had known and liked, brought up no inviting train of reverie. I felt instinctively that I should not care for him, and that he would prove stiff and solemn. Yet the qualities I assigned him could be due certainly to no overweight of learning. He was unable to undertake the instruction of Fred, and my father had decided to send the latter to school. It might have been supposed I should hail this arrangement as a wise and desirable one. I should be safe now from those sudden attacks both in speech and action which were startling, to say the least of them. Yet strangely enough my sensation was not exactly one of relief. Fred was joyous, and that is an element too alluring in a household to be lightly dispensed with. If he vexed me sometimes, he enlivened me again, and when I pictured his absence from the circle, the light of mirth seemed to have died out in it. True, Dick might still be expected to show himself noisy, and to give trouble with disorder and untidiness, Merylle might become uproarious at her musical exercises, and George rouse us with an occasional outcry for food—but these distinctive traits had no reflex action, so to speak. They partook only of the uninviting nature of selfishness or carelessness. They

lacked the fun, the lurking humour of Fred's antics, which seldom sprang from a personal standing-point, but had always a well-directed aim upon others.

Undoubtedly I found them often objectionable at the time from this very cause, but in the abstract they had a certain exciting property which I felt now I should miss. My mother, too, was affected insensibly by the approaching separation, and whenever her spirits were overcast a shadow fell naturally upon mine. She had felt and allowed that the step, as regarded Fred, was an unavoidable one, and had fully agreed in my father's desires and decisions. Still this acquiescence did not altogether free her from a regret that a change of the kind had to come. It seemed to separate her in a measure from that time of earliest hope and happiness when children are a mother's very own, and when they lie, by her right to an exclusive care and loving watchfulness over them, closest to her heart. She had had her number as yet unbroken. The system of home education which she had not only planned but accomplished had never let one be missed even temporarily from the circle. It was this circumstance which had caused an increase of wonder and perplexity in my mind when I learned first of her intention to leave us herself for a distant destination, and a prolonged absence. She often called us "her diamonds," and looked round upon us with eyes sparkling with joy and tenderness; and well I knew

and understood now that it was no eagerness to recover a long-lost treasure for its mere intrinsic value that had led to this departure. She was yielding rather to an irresistible impulse of the same true-hearted affection that made her own darlings so dear to her. Even in their midst she could not forget the strong ties of kindred or the claims of duty. She preserved amongst her own more immediate interests that fulness of sympathy which can stretch out a hand of love and help to others.

She had spoken to me often of late of Fred's prospects, and of her mingled hopes and anxieties respecting the approaching step.

"I trust all may go well and happily with him," she had said to me only that morning. "He is so light-hearted," she added, "he does not think as yet of trouble or change himself. But I know he will miss a good deal when the separation has actually come."

"Yes, mother," I had acquiesced, "and I am afraid we shall miss him, too. He was a great tease, no doubt, but he was a dear old fellow all the same. I can't imagine the house without him, and his wild spirits. There will be quite a void in it."

As yet, however, I had not arrived at this blank stage in my experience. While I still leant upon the rustic gate, and gazed in on the cowslip field, there was a quick step behind, followed almost instantaneously by an imprisonment of my arms. The

clasp was tight and aggressive as ever, but for once I bore it without violent rebuff.

"Fred, Fred! I thought you were off for a ride," I cried. "What brings you here in such a rush?"

"What sends you up into the clouds?" was his retort. "I am home this half hour, and had a good gallop all over the country beforehand. 'We take no note of time but by its loss.' You should have an alarm-clock set at your ear, Nell. It would keep you alive, and be miles ahead of these gewgaws," and he gave a sudden jerk to my new coral "drops," a birthday gift which I was especially proud of. Pain brought back my protective petulance to me forthwith, and I sent him flying off pretty fast.

"Really, Fred, you put no limits to sufferance," I exclaimed. "I bore with your dreadful squeeze of my arms and said nothing. But I don't believe you are ever satisfied till you have made me cry out."

"I wanted to rouse you, Nell. You did look such a mope when I came up. Your thoughts were nowhere; a mere touch would have been ghostlike to you. A good honest shake was far better. Now, what were you mooning over, I'd be glad to know?"

"Nothing, of course, since my thoughts were nowhere."

"Nowhere present, I mean. It was the absent was in your eye. I'll lay any money on that."

"The absent what?"

"It isn't a thing, Nellie, it's a body, to be sure. Not your own, though you *are* losing all substantiality. Still, I wouldn't say you were quite spiritual yet. It was another form you were gazing at—a manly one in a clerical coat."

"Was I?" I said. "I don't think so. If any one was in my mind it was yourself."

"I in your mind, Nell? Don't try to force that stunner on me," and he gave a sort of incredulous blink to his eye. "I saw some one up at the house worth ten of me—as you'd lay a price on us, at all events. Now, you needn't get red. Your cheeks don't bear it. They have more than enough to do with the peony stock they have in hand."

It was in vain to meet him either with indignation or indifference. He ran on in his usual teasing strain, till he had me really provoked.

"I wonder you haven't some faint idea of what you are talking of," I exclaimed. "You make the most senseless jokes, and cling on to them then, as if they were your only mainstay in life."

"They are yours at any rate, my poor old Nellie. Whenever I'm not with you, you're as dull as a duck-pond. All in a muddle beneath, and not a bit of brightness even on the surface. You allow that—don't you?" and he gave me an interrogatory shake.

It was impossible to return a steady answer under that process, and I did not attempt it. I merely suggested that Merylle required some assistance in the tying of

her cowslip ball, and thereupon I was released. There seemed a chance of creating confusion here, and the opportunity was irresistible. But scarcely had he snapped the string of the flowers, hoisted Lucy in his arms, set Dick spinning like a teetotum, and George wailing for the loss of a lollypop dropped in the commotion—scarcely were these deeds successfully accomplished, than he was back with me again.

"I say, Nell," he began, "why don't you go in for some fun yourself? Either that, or put on your spectacles with the wiseacres up at the house. I dare say they'd let you into the conclave. I heard the rector asking for you."

"The rector?" I murmured. "Is Mr. Horton there?"

He broke into a laugh.

"Why need it be he?" he exclaimed. "Can there not be two of the same feather? A curate passes through some mystic change, and he's one no longer. Mr. Locke is not himself at all of late. I can see that with half an eye. Can't you, Nellie?"

This was too much. He would never give me any peace on that subject till it, or myself, was worn threadbare.

"He is not actually a rector yet—not until he's inducted, or something of that sort," I said dryly.

"But it's done," he declared. "He has even read himself in. Didn't you miss him last Sunday? But I know you did. Your head popped down like a

puppet's when you caught sight of the desolate desk; you couldn't look up for an age, and I never heard a note from you in the hymns. You were asleep, I think, or dreaming, at all events. I saw you blink like an owl at old Horton's discourse."

"If you would look about you a little less, you would be saved the trouble of making so many remarks," I said. "*Your* glance cast downwards would be a decided novelty—too much so, I am afraid. You would have the whole church staring at you."

"Should I?" he laughed. "I half think I'll try it. It would be fun to be the centre of all eyes. That's what girls are—isn't it, Nell? One like you, I mean."

An attempted grasp at his curly locks, in answer to his mocking query, was signally baffled. He made one bound, and vaulting over the gate, which would have swung back easily to admit him, he was amongst the cowslip-gatherers in a trice, and had left me standing in a lonely pose as before.

I moved on after a little while, and following the track of the pretty lane which wound betwixt the fields, I plucked a few ferns now and again, but in reverie rather than with that deep discrimination as to their beauty and variety which a young lady is supposed to exhibit. I am afraid some of Fred's nonsense had become matter for contemplation, and this was certainly a poor substitute for rational thought or observation. Had he any foundation for his absurdities? I said to myself. Was it really true that Mr. Locke had been wishing



for me, and asking for me? As the mental inquiries were propounded, I had reached a point in the lane where two ways diverged. One led out direct upon the front avenue, the other curved inwards, in the opposite direction, towards some remote pastures. I paused for a second. Which path should I follow? The first I should have taken naturally, as I had no object in pursuing a lonely ramble; but a thought deterred me: I might meet some one here whom I had already left at the house, and had parted from there. I could not appear to be lingering where he must pass, as if I had been waiting and watching for him.

It is certainly most unfortunate when embarrassment interferes with friendliness, or the instinctive action we should otherwise adopt. We lose much of freedom, often of pleasure, by this inconvenient intruder. But my feelings were no longer under my own control, and a course which could not be followed simply were better resigned.

I turned suddenly towards the farther route, and as I did so, I experienced a slight sinking of the heart, as if I had myself put a barrier to a possible joy.

More than once I had fancied that Mr. Locke found it difficult to say a mere friend's good-bye to me, and that some more earnest words than conventional ones were on his lips. But again I rejected the idea, as one born rather of Fred's pursuing jests than of the fuller vision which flashes hope into certainty.

I walked on deeper into the mazes of the rural

lane. Still the spring day was lovely, the hedges fragrant, and the air melodious; and still that misty melancholy gathered around my steps, and shut out half the brightness.

Suddenly I heard a footfall behind. It was Fred again, I said to myself, and I quickened my pace at the moment almost to a run. I knew that if there were not tears actually in my eyes, there was something so closely approaching to them that I could not have borne his rough and rapid scrutiny. At this movement on my part, a sound stopped me.

My name was called—"Ellie! Ellie!" Only that. But it was enough; more than enough. Never before had the familiar name been uttered by that voice, never by any in such tones of beseeching appeal.

I turned, and saw Mr. Locke standing but a few paces away. He had paused, but was gazing at me with an intentness which almost in itself must have had the power to arrest me. My heart gave one throb, and then I knew that happiness is not all a dream; that it comes sometimes when we have ceased to expect it, when we have all but resigned it, when we must take it with a mingling of trembling and ecstasy, as if it were scarce an earthly good.

\* \* \* \* \*

Only a moment or two had passed, but all seemed changed. The scene of nature was set in a more golden framework, and the faint atmosphere of sadness around my thoughts had floated away into

sunlight. Yet even then I paused in my new-found joy, and nothing of doubt, but a motion of deepest thankfulness bore my view farther away than the horizon of time, than the light of a passing day, however loved and lovely.

Everything was very fair here, but it took its beauty from afar. There was something yet higher and purer to look to, and my heart repeated the words which were but an expression of the fulness of a happy emotion :

"There is a smile upon the fields of earth,  
A shine of diamonds on the dew-washed flower ;  
Yet, as we gaze, a change, a shade hath passed,  
Nothing will last one single steadfast hour.

"Nothing below—but everything above,  
Where visioned joy a living rapture takes ;  
One Presence fills a universe of love,  
And brighter than the diamond, glory breaks."

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